

*by the same author*



The Destructive Element  
Vienna  
Poems

# THE BURNING CACTUS

by

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To  
W.H. AUDEN  
and to  
T.A.R. HYNDMAN





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# THE DEAD ISLAND

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# THE DEAD ISLAND

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## I

Each morning when she woke up in her hut at the top of the hotel garden, she knew whether the day was fine, for a fine day seemed strung on the waterfall which ran down the mountain side into the sea, with a ruling murmur uninterrupted by the hush of sirocco or the thrashing of rain. The sea was silent and brittle like smashed coloured glass.

While she ate her breakfast of rolls, honey and coffee on the hotel terrace, she sat watching the two islands at the mouth of the bay. The islands in the morning light became the awakening symbols of her spiritual healing.

The mountains, with their groves of olive and cypress trees and their high boulders hammering a jagged wall against the uppermost sky, looked down on the hotel and the two or three houses of the village harbour, walled in from the bay.

Here she had alighted after many journeys, three

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marriages, many lives in expensive rooms of cities, the waste and recently the loss of the greater part of a fortune. She had no impulse to move: she was disturbed beyond mere restlessness: here she must decide.

Meanwhile, her husband was as unfixed as she was settled. A few days after she had left him in Paris he had bought an aeroplane, flown alone to Copenhagen, there picked up a tough handsome Danish blonde, made her his secretary and piloted her across Europe to Geneva, from where, to his dictation, she typed out a letter explaining all this to his wife. He sacked his secretary—who was after all uninteresting when bared of a shining leather flying coat and unglued from the cockpit of a streamlined monoplane—in Lucerne, and flew on alone to the North of Ireland. Two months later an indiscreet packet filled with photographs and drawings of his attractive colleagues, came from the Canadian frontier, where he was engaged in smuggling. She realized that he must be drinking less than usual since he had escaped the prison of marriage. She imagined his tall broad Nordic figure—with sandy hair falling over the high flushed forehead, horny active hands, pale blue unconcentrating eyes, and loose mouth—dressed in light rough tweeds and leading a life of whizzing

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irresponsibility, measurable only in terms of speed and horse-power. As she coolly thought of him she rested her fingers on her knee to cover his horizontal activity with the awareness of her too small hand.

A few more weeks still, and she would know her mind. While she waited, she looked forward to his letters, which amused her as an uncommonly lively serial in a newspaper might do.

What aeroplanes, liners, drink, drugs, love affairs or social interests had driven her here after so many journeys, so many failures? Only money. And now her life, as she had known it, was at an end. All of life, life, except a lump sum, in charge of her Swiss bankers, which would last her a year at her usual rate of spending.

She waited. She read and she wrote letters. Turning on her heel at the end of walks, or flushing suddenly while she was dressing, her worst shocks were memories of scenes and indiscretions. In her dreams she argued with her husband. Yet she was grateful that she had been able to rent the big tarred wooden hut, containing one large and two smaller rooms, at the end of the garden. For the first time in her life she was alone. Outside, the spring weather was fine: faster than in the north, a tide, inextricably bound with the bluest days, gained across the land, bringing



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flowers in the meadows, and leaves on the great plane tree in front of the church.

Sometimes the sirocco blew from the south, fusing the waves in the bay and bringing foggy shapeless clouds which clutched over the rocky heights of the mountains and made the sea greyly reflect the glaring sky and the heavy, colourless land. The heat became oppressive and she experienced migraine and an aching of the wrists and loins. Once too she developed a slight fever which, although it lasted only a day, kept her awake at night, when she lay in bed, hating the sun, which exasperated her in her memory like kettledrums tapping above hot clouds of desert sand.

One evening she walked along a path by the shore until she came to a grove of bushes and cypresses, where two nightingales were singing. Below her were the black rocks and the peacefully splashing surface planes of shifting water. She paused in her walk and listened closely to the birds' song bursting from the packed bushes, like white satin streamers against the corkscrewing cypresses: the dropping links of a chain were followed by one long repeated half-wailing, half-chuckling and exultant note. She seemed to lose herself in the ecstasy of sound, and then, from the darkness, her own

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identity drifted back to her: she was eclipsed by the physical consciousness of her naked self her black hair, her wide too-ponderous hips, her thick thighs tapering with relief of the knees to the small feet, her small hands, which were her only really ugly feature; now all the defects seemed part of the richness of her whole being, they paid tribute to her delicate ears, the fine nape of her neck, her firm breasts. While the birds were still singing, she pressed both her hands to her neck, and, feeling the silky fall of her hair in the darkness, seemed fulfilled. This experience satisfied her more than her three marriages: she counted her losses, and one which she now accepted was that, spiritually, she had never ceased to be a virgin.

When the moment hung before her like a fruit at its ripest, she was disturbed by the roaring of a man's voice from the hills. The roar persisted long enough to stop the nightingales. The image of a man who held his fettered arms apart, dangling chains, whilst shouting, now appeared to her, recalling an engraving of the prisoner of Chillon.

Doubtless the man on the road halfway up the mountain had shouted only because he was drunk, or because he wished to attract the notice of his friends in the village below. Yet the cartoon, the

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sense of a Balkan country yelling for freedom, persisted in her mind, altering and deepening her vision of the country. When she had learned that the peasants believed the slopes of the mountains to be haunted, the village ceased to be a "resort" for her and she thought of ghosts among the cypresses. One day she took the little steamer to the city near by, and when walking back she came to a plateau with many soldiers on it, divided into groups of ten or twelve, each group with a leader; they wore ruffled stained uniforms of field-grey with tented caps of the same unstiffened cloth. When she passed by, the groups began to sing folk songs with gaunt Slavonic themes of two or three notes only, which were reiterated, each group singing a different song in separate harmony, so that all the songs of all the groups combined in one tuneless disharmony, harsh like the plateau itself. This naked melody of two or three notes often recurred, later she heard it sung with obscenity by a blue dungareed stamping and dancing villager who always went home shouting drunk each night; with melancholy by two early wanderers along the road.

Then she learned that it was unsafe to swim more than a mile out to sea, because of the sharks, which follow the liners down the Adriatic; and, on her

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walks she began to notice firstly the large green lizards, streaming in a liquid flash across the sunlit path; later, the snakes. There were large slow-moving brown grass-snakes, and vipers. In the interior there was a small yellow snake, the most deadly in Europe, so feared that the country people received a reward for every one which, with their pronged sticks, they caught.

Once she had heard about the snakes she could not for long resist climbing the mountain to look over the ridge into the interior. She followed no zigzag path. She put on a grey flannel short skirt and went straight up the mountain through heavily scented scratching gorse and broom, which concealed loose stones and earth lying on stone; then across an area of loose shale, finally, over a face of steep and in some places overhanging rock. She hardly paused, and during the climb the expression on her face, which was one of extreme and scarcely necessary willed determination, did not alter; but when she had reached the top and saw the view she gave a cry of delight. She looked back across her ascent, at the immense height of the sea filled up until the level of her eyes, a flat wrinkling wall, with wet streams coiling on its baked surface. In front of her the mountain ran dully down to a high valley, bare and

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sprinkled with glaring boulders and with shrub pushing from thin crevices where there was soil. At the precise base of the valley there was a dewpond grown round with sparsely-leaved oaks, their trunks speckled with lichen, in a bright small meadow which was guarded preciously by a wall of boulders. Beyond this valley was another peak, beyond that another and deeper valley with the main road running behind the mountains and round back to the sea. Then there were ranges on ranges, of which she could only see the naked peaks, repeating the same petty edges in a receding procession. The landscape was a desert of mountains, still wearing the arid terror of the cataclysm that first threw them up.

At the hotel she found a letter for her from a certain Dr. Rooth, who wrote to say that he had met her husband in Vienna (why? with the faintest anxiety she wondered):

“I was glad to see him, both for his own sake and because he brought me the most welcome news that, by a remarkable coincidence, you are at the hotel where my friend, the very dear boy whom I was able, as a miracle, to help over a difficult period in his tired, suffering life, is going, in a week’s time, to rest for a month. Rest will heal him. I am

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writing now only to ask you to be a trifle more friendly to him than you would with the completest stranger. Guard him from his weakness! Give him your goodwill! He has suffered so much and endured so bravely, he is looking forward now to this month of strengthening peace! He has a beautiful soul, a loving, tender nature, and I am so happy, since the doctors say that his hour of darkness is past. I also can rest. Help him."

She was puzzled by this jargon. Dr. Rooth, she remembered, was an aristocrat who, having of course been ruined by the inflation, now earned his living as an art dealer; she had once bought a picture from him. He was a connoisseur and he had discovered some painters in asylums. . . . She went to the peroxided smiling proprietress, who was too stout for her yellow summer dress which, although of silk, fell in a thick pleat over the division of her buttocks, and asked whether a room had been booked for this young man by Dr. Rooth. There was a yellow flashing of blonde hair, rings, bosom, and a single gold-capped tooth in the lower register of a mouth that in other respects deserved an exhibition. As though from a cash register working in foreign figures, she extracted the information, yes,

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that the young man would arrive in a week and stay here for a month, on his way to the island. To which island? To the Dead Island, the one with a golf course. But what a depressing name! Why was it called the Dead Island? The Dead Island, because of the wonderful old Byzantine ruins there, which madame would surely want to see. The Dead Island, secondly, because brandy could be got there more cheaply than in any other place in Europe. The Dead Island doubly damned and dead. They joked.

He was not, as she had expected, one of a distraught party, all of whom, in flash clothes and carrying golf clubs and patent leather multi-labelled suitcases, were verbosely *en passage* for the island. He was almost frighteningly collected, like a wound-up spring with his smooth dark glance of failure, which, when he first introduced himself, immediately seemed to sum her up, and yet did not see through her; for his behaviour, even his firm way of shaking hands was that of one who comes to immediate and perhaps wrong conclusions.

He was short and there was a certain violence in his supple movements like those of a caged animal, as in his muzzled expression imposed on the dark cornelian eyes, the curling-back black hair, upward curving mouth, high cheekbones and pointed ears of

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a faun. There was a contradiction of emphasis in his appearance like a picture with violent contours sketched in the softest colours: the total impression was one of worldly failure, and this she found remarkably sympathetic, as it contrasted with the boisterousness which she found most irritating in her husband.

After supper he had come over to her table and introduced himself. They had coffee on the terrace and sat looking out on the islands, now bronzed palm leaves resting on the shining bay. After the first flat common words had been laid down like a tablecloth between them, she read in her own mind the peace and healing which the islands symbolized, and, with a small anxiety, waited to read what they might mean in his; waited while he bubbled a little with American gushing enthusiasm about the coast. Then with a different but quieter accent, in his natural voice, which was slow with a New England precision, he remarked that near to the islands there was a city drowned beneath the sea. They smiled, and wondered whether anyone had ever seen it.

Their conversation began on this peaceful note, dismissing the obscene vision of the proprietress. After coffee he asked her whether she knew Giuseppe Rooth, and when she said 'yes' he passed over



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her slight knowledge of the doctor with an almost commanding smile. As they walked under the trees past the tiny harbour, where tables were put out and a few men sat in the glaring limelight blaze of a roaring petroleum lamp, he seemed to stand apart from her and, with hand laid on heart, to sing his aria in praise of Dr. Rooth. The monologue lasted the whole evening, while he told her of Guiseppo's collection of paintings by postmen, lunatics, soldiers in the trenches; how in his charlady (now, unfortunately, detained in an asylum), he had possibly discovered a second Douanier Rousseau. Yet this little man with his life of poverty, his wrinkled face and manner reminding one of Voltaire, his command of German like Jean Paul, was kindness itself, was indeed a saint. His friend owed everything to him.

While she listened, she was struck by the conviction, the rapture even, with which, in presenting Dr. Rooth he seemed at the same time sadly to annihilate himself, and, like a medium, to translate his own being into the vivid testimonial of the man who had written to her.

She was not affected by the words of the monologue, which were like a bad libretto sung to beautiful music by a fine tenor, so much as by her recognition that his first words were simply to underline

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everything Dr. Rooth had written. The friends appeared to stand the more beautifully together, because he had not read Dr. Rooth's letter. They worked in unseen unison, and he had been saved—she could not guess from what—by their miraculous friendship.

The relationship of these two men hammered down on her, emphasizing her own isolation, and making it impossible for her, in such a setting and with such a companion, not to evoke the figure of her husband running violently on bare Northern slopes of pinewoods and cold skies. For the first time she thought bitterly of her own marriage, and she felt jealous of the two men.

At the end of their first meeting, without having said a word about themselves, they were almost intimate: an effect even of silence was produced by the very volubility with which Dr. Rooth mildly broadcast through the loudspeaker of his friend's mask of tragic faun, covering over with a thick earthy crust many revelations and questions which should naturally have been asked. They established a common ground on which they might meet above the tombs of their immediate pasts, recognizing that each needed a pause of healing peace, that each was haunted by his pair, and they met in the lee of

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those more strident figures—her husband and Dr. Rooth.

Soon this mutual forbearance palpably emanating in the form of telegrams from her husband, and charmingly restrained postcards from Dr. Rooth, crystallized in a businesslike act of "service". In June the hotel became crowded; one morning when he called on her at the hut he found the room had not yet been tidied, since the maids were busy in the hotel. He fetched a broom from the cupboard, and in half an hour he had swept out the hut. When all was fresh and neat he put the broom away and, standing by the door, looked at her with a new and happy expression which immediately had the effect of making his face seem as young as that of a shy and dazzling boy. They had been thrown so closely together by the arrangements of the crowded hotel that they had been forced into a proximity of vision which is usually only the torture and ecstasy of lovers. The lover sees one human being, to whom he is always near, portentously magnified. He kisses the neck, and gazing up he sees the nose foreshortened to the vast perspective of a girdered bridge straddling across the flooding glacier cheeks. The whiteness of the eye is severed by channels of hissing blood. He endures the terrible craters of the porous

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skin. Equally there are ecstatic consolations: as when she lay beside him, her face looming whitely above the grass, a nest of delicate thrush's eggs, coiled over by the vital curves of black hair, like a bird. To the same degree as he saw her thus, she became conscious of her own strangeness. Now as he lightly turned round, a veil was lifted, and they both had a vision of her with her lips parted, her hair accentuating the forward curves of throat and lifted chin, so that her near and eager face was the prow of a ship, while the loosened bow of her easy mantle suggested the waves. She had nakedly revealed her sense of power, the healing which her eyes drew every morning from the islands. Still laughing, he gave her the name that lived in both their minds already: the prophetess.

She rejected it as laughingly, only to be faced by his suddenly asking her, as though in mockery, to prophesy about himself. They both kept up the sense that there was a ship in the room, that they were staring down on flashing waters, that a gay wave might in a moment throw up some lacerated corpse of the past, something never referred to, which they would simply let drown again in peace and without guilt. On these terms, she asked him what his past had been. He produced a jocular

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adjective which proved indeed there was a corpse, and above the waters (which now hushingly drowned his inebriated image) he sealed the laughing word with a look of unutterable truth.

The floor covered up the waters again and they became conscious of the hut and that she was still gently smiling. But they must not pause on the deepest note of confession. She must know now what he had been. A dancer. Not a ballet dancer: only one of the chorus in a variety show. Too simply, she moved to open the gramophone, to set him dancing at once, to send him spinning forward again into his career. He shook his head and smiled rather as a poet might smile if she had parodied the actions of a person who asked him, on a first meeting, to recite his own poems. The prophetess had failed. But she in her turn had a name for him, which she now produced: if she was a prophetess, he, the dancer, was a Dionysian. At this he just stared blankly at her, and she noticed that his eyes were bloodshot. Then he quietly asserted that he would do her housework every day, so she must dismiss her maid.

So every day he came up to the hut, and with neat quickness tidied the room, first working in his shirt sleeves, and, later, when the weather became very hot, wearing only a bathing slip. As each day she

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watched the disciplined movements of muscles across his shoulder-blades on either side of the vertebral trestled path of the spine, she noticed that his body was getting brown. When he worked, he restrained a coiled-back power which would, she imagined, enable him to twirl about, or leap from end to end of the room, while opening and shutting his legs like scissors.

She made a small return for the housework by asking him to join her at coffee after meals. She never offered him wine, nor did she herself drink when he was there. He accepted the coffee, explaining that he was glad to do so, for since he had no margin of money beyond his food and lodging and the fare to the island, he could afford no extras. She smiled that she could well afford to give him coffee. At that he rather luridly grinned, and while she was startled into noticing that his mouth, except when it was dumbly closed, wore, when he smiled, more than any other feature, what she called his damaged look, he made a joke of the huge pile of money which he supposed she must have. She did not answer that she had money only to last her a year.

At that time the nights were moonless dark and calm, illuminated by the dispersed and secret light of the stars, and with brilliant lights far on the sea itself

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where the fishermen speared the fish that rose to the surface, attracted by lamps fastened to the bows of the fishing boats. She suggested that they might go fishing with a man from the harbour. The night which they chose was particularly still, as soon as their boat had left the harbour it slid on to the black shining mass of the dead water fringed by the tented sky. Their lamp had not yet been lit, and there was no sound except showers of song from the nightingales singing in the groves along the shore, and the straight asserting strokes of the boatman's oars. The water inaudibly swirled beneath and around them. She felt the wind only breathe against her face: her sense of the boat's cutting movement through the flowing areas of blackness was so strongly conscious that they seemed in space, in a universe where every object was flowing, where she even felt conscious of the different kind of movement which kept the boat buoyant on the water at a certain distance above the sea's floor.

The water seemed thin black liquid tar, but when the roaring burner of the lamp had been lit, where the light shone down, it became a transparent olive green enamel. The light soaked thickly through the coarse water, and after a few minutes the nozzles of fish began to rise towards the surface. The fisherman

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now took his spear, the head of which was not a spear but a four-pronged fork, and stood in the bow of the boat. At first they had only seen dark heads and curved backs, but now the fish started turning on their silver sides which flashed upwards, catching the light as brightly as mirrors. The fisherman, standing rigidly in the bow of the boat, suddenly lunged forward, struck his spear into a fish, and, in the same movement jerked it out of the water, transfixed on all four prongs, its body scarcely wriggling.

They drifted towards other boats with, in their bows, the men standing silhouetted against the horizon, and leaning over the broad wells of light into which they thrust their spears. The black hulls of the boats rode over the illuminated paths of water.

The young man and the slightly older woman sat in the stern of their boat, watching the fishermen. They were most sure of each other when they were thus, watching some activity external to them both. He put his arm round her. Darling. He had already surrounded her in her thoughts and she responded by resting her head for a few seconds lightly on his shoulder. He could smell her hair.

She admired his singular masked uprightness. His arm, laid on her shoulder, in its muscular thickness felt more like a miracle of engineering than a real



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arm: it was a miracle which one somehow pitied. She wanted to speak about herself, to balance his confession with the symmetry of her own. She looked down at the water and exhorted her past. She said that she had been three times married. Ah, he bore it with the resilience of a dance-floor plank, pressed by the lightest ballerina's foot! If she had had three husbands, he teased her, then her present husband was her fourth. But she had not meant that: the present husband was "a part and parcel of the past". She stated, as though in cold print, her position: she had come away to decide her future.

He accepted this without asking any questions. He merely removed the arm from her shoulder, and stared out into the dark, so that she knew she had thrust him back into a familiar loneliness, by revealing the isolation of her own thoughts. She must go on, she must produce a truth, as irremediable as the vision of his floating corpse above which their eyes had met. She dully told him of her first husband, the pedantic spectacled nervous professor whom she had married when she was eighteen. No, that would not do, for it was only life. Her history must be as exciting as a jazz tune to which one could dance. Her second husband, he was a fit subject for a language which was all jokes. Women often made a fatal second

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marriage simply to escape the first one. He beat her. That was very funny. She laughed aloud (they were so far out in the silence that her laughter seemed to herself like the croaking of a bird) at the memory of her wedding, when she had cried a day and a night. He was an athletic persistent scientific Jew who had often followed her all the way down Oxford Street, shouting above the traffic that they must get married. One imagined him best on a tennis court, dressed in white flannels, sending down selfish volleys, with his clothes, which were a little too small for him, revealing all over his body ventral contours which one hated. This had been a period of travel in which her will had succumbed to passion and curiosity; had been posted, like an express letter through a sealed tube, through tunnels; rattled in the ascetically modern forms of aeroplanes, ships and trains. She was fascinated by him, just as she was fascinated by Vienna and Rome. It was on their journeys between the cities, the areas of magnetic compulsion, that she most resisted him; some of their worst quarrels had been on trains. She did not hate and love: she hated and with suffering desired. As soon as she left him for twelve hours, the complexity of impulse that dragged her fell away: she went alone from Amsterdam on a short visit to Lon-

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don, when, as soon as she got on the boat, she saw that her married life was intolerable. He simply forced her with his egotism to realize his genuine qualities his brilliance as a scientist, his sexuality. He was shaken for the first time when she refused to bear a child because it was his. Sincerely thinking she must be mad, he sent her to a mental specialist. The understanding of this specialist helped to free her.

To be a human being, one lives in a cage of institutions, such as marriage. If one rebels against the bars, one is most probably beaten back by them, in that case one ceases to love and becomes obsessed by the problem of the bars, until the iron enters the human mind. One becomes, in other words, a purely political mentality so, she did not think of her present marriage in terms of her life with her husband only, but in terms of women's freedom, and the work that women might do in altering the world. She would leave her husband because she felt that unless she did so she would be destroyed. His behaviour asked for more patience and understanding than she could give. Why? Well, she accepted the fact that she was selfish, which was irrelevant, for the choice was not between selfishness and self-sacrifice the question remained whether love was any longer

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possible to her, or whether her life had not become the object which was behind all the appearances that obsessed her thoughts: politics, the question of women's freedom.

Her words had taken her too far. She was speaking not to her companion but to herself and her husband, to their relationship, so that what she said was an exploration of the future years, an endeavour to find in the present her future being. She rode once more on their safe anchor of confession: yes, she again joked, her second husband had beaten her black and blue. She had given all the sordid evidence in the law courts. Worst of all her marriage had never been a tragedy, of which she could picture herself the real unhappy heroine. In reality their behaviour was as meaningless as if they had both put on diabolic fancy dress and had played that they were living through the inquisition with whips and thumbscrews and spiked bars.

Comparing the two marriages, she could feel that in spite of everything, she did love her present husband, yet when she said this she felt her upper lip grow tight like a scar, with willed determination.

While she was talking, the warm wind of the sirocco began to rise. The black flatness of the sea was shattered, as though an age of ice were unlocked

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with rushing streams. This transformation made the land seem steady while the immoveable iron sea bounced into wrinkling hills, shaken with a light like the diffused light of mists. The plunging lights from the fishing-boat lamps were now shot sometimes downwards at an oblique angle into the water and sometimes aimlessly into the air. The fishermen, standing in the bows of their boats against the dull smoke of spray and a riding sea, assumed the archaic gestures of heroes, became whalers aiming harpoons, or Romans about to effect a landing. But the spell that magnetized the heaven-pointing fish was broken, they slid away, and the fishermen threw down their prongs and took up oars with which to row home.

As they rowed home she waited for him to show that he was disillusioned in her. So far though from being disillusioned, he sprang up and shouted not to her but violently into the wind that she was honest and decided and clever and generous and beautiful. the words did not matter, what was overpowering was the communicable strength of his conviction. Yet he did not speak to her. he seemed to be challenging invisible adversaries of her past life, when he declared that she had simply been imposed on. He clung to and insisted on her generosity, and whilst

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he madly barked into the wind, she had another impression, that perhaps he was shouting at his own past. his gestures were those of one who throws aside a burden, and she oddly felt that he was throwing off Dr. Rooth.

As though it were essential for him to memorize the fact, he kept on repeating that she was generous, with such insistence that for a moment she was genuinely alarmed; but the night flapping against her head with hot winds was by now so violent that the confused sense of alarm only excited her, until she had a vision of the moment in which they were living as the unreal deep and timeless moment between other moments which are hung over, like a sky with clouds, by events. The winds were rising for a storm, but the storm had not begun: her past life was annulled; for the moment she was nothing, she had the vacuous power to choose a new existence. her joking contact with this young man was at an end, because another relationship was on the point of beginning. What was stated was a new and different kind of love this love was no god, no law, no attraction, it was simply a spacious unifying attitude of mind which enclosed her past and present, her husband, the fisherman hurriedly rowing them home, the young disappointed man sitting darkly beside her.

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She tried to express this in words that instantly dissatisfied her; for words became, not the language of her vision but symbols of the world that had frustrated her being. She fell silent, endeavouring to think of the one unconfused word that would explain everything and free them both of their pasts. He too had stopped talking. And perhaps he had understood, for now he offered the word forgiveness. Forgiveness? She frowned. Forgiveness of whom? Forgiveness of himself. For an instant she was rather amused; then a swinging light that had illuminated him, suddenly blessed her too with the light of her own meaning. It was herself whom she must learn to love. The storm now silenced them and they were soon home.

On one very hot day a week later they took the pleasure steamer, which moved flatly as painted scenery against the calm sea, to the port of the city. The tourists on the deck, women in their summer dresses wet at the armpits, and men in their light suitings, looked like a badly dressed chorus of a musical comedy, quickly collected from a group of girls without charm, and men who were ugly, handsome or spotty, the bored amateurs of pleasure. The two friends standing in the bow of the ship some yards above the white coxcomb crest of

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ploughed surf, were a shining hero and heroine to this inferior caste.

The city with its wall "as perfectly preserved as any you will meet in Europe" and its cathedral which "legend holds was founded by Richard Coeur de Lion", had been destroyed by an earthquake, and quickly rebuilt by its "proud merchants" during the middle of the seventeenth century, so that not only was it old, it was a three-hundred-year-old replica of something even older. The thick walls of the harbour, roundly projecting loaf-shaped fortresses into the sea, were as cleanly preserved as the turrets of a castellated battleship. The harbour was surrounded on three sides by the wall and a gate led from the quay through the wall into the city. The city with its broad stone-paved main street, the cathedral square and side streets branching off, was packed within its walls as exquisitely as the works in an old watch, of which the cathedral dome formed the hairspring and regulator, while little churches islanded in side streets were subsidiary bearings.

As they walked down the main street, on either side of them walls of marble were unscrolled, drawn on with shaded openings of windows, doors and coloured shutters. As though the architecture were sculpture set on a pedestal of base metal, the ground



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floors of the great houses had been converted into shops where jewellery, postcards and souvenirs were sold; the noble fronts rose above these bases with a music of their own, belonging to another age, assertive as the continuous quiet roll of drums. They passed the cathedral, whose metal, marble-supported dome was the bud of an exotic flower beneath the transparent slab of hot afternoon sky: like the flower of that cactus which, when it has grown the leaves of many years, pushes up a towering stalk and bud; when the domed bud explodes to blossom, the entire plant, flower and leaves and stalk, dies.

When they had completed a tour of the walls, it was time for dinner. They went to a fish restaurant where she ordered a meal and with it wine. They drank the wine as though they had been released from anxiety. Before the meal, she had given him a banknote with which to pay, and the fact that he accepted this unquestioningly seemed to her a sign that there was a rare naturalness, attained by few people, about their relationship. He did not even remember to give her the change.

When it was dark they walked home along a road that led inland towards the mountains, round the walls of the city and across the small plain where she had heard the soldiers singing, back to the coast; then

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they climbed the steep headland which divided the city and harbour from their bay. It was not yet completely dark, and the road, where they vigorously walked, shone faintly, as if with a resonance of sunset; still, it blackened, and then the level road of fire shone above them in the sky, as the southern night grew and swarmed with stars. They themselves seemed as solid as gondoliers standing upright or leaning forward to propel their boats, while the landscape seemed to flow past them, a stream in which all was shifting, except the cypress trees which burned like torches of black motionless fire on the impalpable mountain side. They climbed higher and saw the lights of the city shift below them with every step they took, until finally, from the highest point, they were resolved into a gigantic brooch of vulgar gold, a crescent of liquid yellow dots sprayed out into the sea.

Silently they waited here. Their hearing plumbed down the precipitous cliff beneath and listened to the glabrous sucking of the quiet waves amongst the rocks. they could feel their hearts beating like birds trapped inside their bodies; but their sight shot far beyond the city to the point of a headland where the glaring diamond lighthouse light was hung up in the darkness; soon the diamond vanished and a muslim

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dawn filtered obliquely across the furthest horizon. Unprecedented blackness shut them in. A minute later they themselves were illuminated by a hard whiteness in which they stared as if a moving photograph of each had suddenly been revealed to the other on a screen. The spotlight was on them both: it was on the dancer and his partner, and the spiritual landscape had reeled into forgotten shadow. their mechanical world of trains and headlights and photographs had discovered them with its blinding eye, had asserted, as a searchlight swings to tip the tail of an enemy aeroplane, that she was the human swan, faked and dressy, sinking back with the heightened colour and trembling pulse of momentary exhaustion, her eyes splendidly shining: that he was handsome and brand new, as if a quick pair of scissors had cut his silhouette into pointed black and white, giving him the starred select features of a genuine hero.

They turned from each other and looked at the wall built against the hill on the inland side of the road. Light streamed over the crude blocks of hewn stone, as though over a screen, magnifying small motes of dust on the condenser, which, as the lamp revolved, moved slowly over the wall like grain and scratches on a film. They watched their

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two dramatic shadowed islands surrounded by the tide of slowly moving grained light. Inevitably these two islands merged into the continent of their gigantic close-up kiss.

When the darkness had eclipsed them again, they embraced closely, then broke away and started walking on towards the village. After a long silence he began to hum the chief hits of a revue in which he had once danced: the humming soon became singing and shouting, then he began to step-dance. He stamped, ran, shook his arms and shouted; she could only stare at him, feeling herself incapable of appreciating, while she imagined him in an obscene actor's tailcoat and carrying a stick and an opera hat, which he shook like a cocktail shaker, opening and shutting it.

He stopped dancing and for the rest of the walk put his arm in hers. They came to the hut, lit no candle, but swiftly undressed in the starlight, and like stripped divers plunged into their sheets. He kissed her hair and eyes, then her whole body. She lay back and caressed him, while her eyes passively absorbed, through the window above her bed, glimmering impressions of the shining bay and the warm islands lying there in the shadow, occasionally blackened out as if with a shutter, by his

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naked body or mouthing head. Before she was drowned in love, she saw figures of her past life in circles, circles of the Underground railway filled with faces of clerks or shopping women, circles round a sunlit court of high flats where rich women with lapdogs met for tea, the interior of one of her own drawing-rooms where a quartet was playing an early work of Mozart in the centre of the room, surrounded by the circle of her yearning friends. The man now eclipsed her, covering her head with unquenchable blackness, and with a spading body forcing her to enter the circle of the temple and the dance.

Fulfilled in her intuition of the Dionysian, at last they merely rested, and he lay in her arms. She was aware again of lights in the darkness, fireflies, glow-worms, lamps and of the cool air, the drifting scents of shrubs. The nightingales were singing. in ripe peace she stroked her fingers through his hair "The faun. Lips, ears, eyes, mouth, hair of a faun."

He did not answer, but lay dumbly, with his head pressed between her breasts. "Say something to me." He remained silent. The image of a faun with wiry hair pressed over by a sombre yet delighting mask drowned without a cry in the open waters of her

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mind, and now from pitying waves he was born again as a child lying against her. The tears of her total excess and of a happy fatigue succeeding to gaiety, overbrimmed her eyes. She lay there amply content, without a spasm, her eyes shining, where the minute lights shone on her, her damp cheeks shone like wet marble.

The roaring voice of the blue dungareed stamping and dancing village drunkard stopped the nightingales. It became louder as he walked down the path past the hut, then it faded away.

Still he did not move to kiss away her tears. The tender images of him now seemed lies and fantasies of her own dreaming, which had no relation to him. She repulsed them almost with horror and now the weight of his body was inanimate and cruel as though the weight of a wheel pressed against her in a street accident. His spirit was lifted away in some coldness of the night she could not recognize. Then the sense of his intense unhappiness groaned from her: "I don't know you, dear, we don't know each other. Please say something." He was deadly silent. In a moment of panic, she thought he was really dead, naked not of his clothes, but of his flesh, a skeleton. He rolled on to his side, when she shook him. She raised her voice "This is hell, we are in

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hell," and she stopped fondling with his hair, and, clenching her fist with the release of self-hatred, struck her own side and sobbed bitterly. At this he returned to consciousness, but not of her. He stood up and dressed quietly, while she lay there weeping. When he was dressed, he paused a moment beside the bed, then he drew back the sheet, and watched her naked in the fluting light of morning, her flesh rich and soft like peaches in candle light. Then he left the room. The villager had gone home, and the morning birds were singing.

## II. THE START

"I want to apologize for my behaviour last night. It must have upset you terribly."

"Dearest, dearest I don't want you even to think about anything so unimportant. Affairs are often a failure to begin with I know, because I've had so many of them Besides, if anyone was to blame it was I. I may have been thinking too much of my own pleasure."

"You are very kind, very kind. I have some presents       "

"I hadn't realized that perhaps last night you may

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have had almost your first sexual experience with a woman. Of course, if I had known, I would have suggested it was better for us to wait. But from what you told me of your past, I thought— You know, dear, nothing drastic has happened, we can still wait and do nothing till we know each other better. After all, the trouble really is simply that we don't know each other."

"I have some presents."

He was carrying the presents, wrapped in brown paper with new white string, on his arm.

They had each passed the morning separately.

Taking it as no bad sign that he did not appear, as usual, to tidy up the hut, she had gone out of doors and continued that walk which was after all her most consistent experience here, since all her walks added up to that one path along which her mind was growing.

Briskly moving along through pricking yellow shrubs, she soon decided that his unhappiness must be due to some sexual difficulty, for which she named the clinical term. She blamed herself, deciding that she should have refused him that night: surely the beauty of their relationship consisted in their waiting, learning to trust each other without the exhibition of proof, just as the fishing boat had



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seemed suspended in space, in a universe where every object was flowing?

It was easy enough for her, by just walking along the wonderful coast, to smooth over her doubts, but what happened to him when he had a whole morning alone in which to reflect on his situation? Did he even look at all at his surroundings, or were they merely the background for a scene in which he practised a series of deceptions on his empty will? Supposing he had spent that morning staring out across the bay, what comfort could the calm vision of the islands, the translucent symbol of his wasted future, bring to him? Supposing then, for a few hours after a disappointment which upset the precarious balance of his quiet, he simply realized the meaning of his life, what could he do?

That realization had been his path that morning. Now, after lunch, their two paths intersected above the wooden matchboard of the hut floor. While it was so easy to read on the rounded flesh of her smiling face framed by the raven hair, that she had made her power and happiness all of one unshatterable shining coloured piece, apprehended from the sea, he came bearing presents from the abyss. Nor did he stop walking. He stumbled round and round the room, eyeing her all the time as though his body

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were not directed by its instinctive avoidance of chairs, walls and the plain deal table, but by the fact that he kept her image at a certain fixed distance in his consciousness, and swung round her like a compass arm round the centre.

"Where have you been?"

He stopped at the edge of the table so that it was between them, and banged down his presents on to it. "Just popped down into the city. Like to see a little life, you know, at times Newspapers, traffic, a bar. I bought some presents for you."

"The city! Do you mean the town, where we were last night?"

"Isn't it a city? Sure it is. There's a bloody whacking great cathedral there."

He said this gustily, as though mention of the picturesque little resort irritated him, and he rejected it like a sheet of paper nonsense thrown impatiently away. He was unshaved, his eyes were bloodshot, his under lip jutted unsteadily, it was evident that he had not slept. So that not only had he had the whole sane morning in which to revert to and harden in an attitude of despair, but also the incalculable hours of the night. She noticed that the hair of his beard was reddish, his dark brown eyes, shot with the red blood smeared across their whites, were threatening

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like the light of street lamp discs struggling redly through yellow fog. His eyes rolled as though they were taking up the walk which his body had heavily abandoned, then they suddenly favoured the parcels with an attention which made them seem as real as the city which he had just denied was made unreal in his idealist world.

“Won’t you open them?” he commanded.

“You must take these things back; you can’t afford them. It’s very kind of you and I truly appreciate it, but you must take them back, or you will have no money left.”

“You’re quite right, I haven’t got any money. My dear, kind, good, beautiful, truthful friend, I have given you everything. I can be generous also. I hope you don’t mind.”

“But—don’t you see?—we’ve got to be sensible. We must think about the future. You have expenses, your rent here, the journey to the islands. You must think of Dr. Rooth.”

“Guiseppe Rooth? Dr. Rooth, who is he? He doesn’t exist any longer. It’s very sad, but quite true. I don’t love him any more: I love you.” Suddenly his voice, after being maudlin, acquired a preaching accent, which, perhaps unintentionally, was a brutal and ungrateful caricature of Dr. Rooth. “Dearest,

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one doesn't have to wander through life denying one's most generous impulses."

"You're very kind," she laughed, recalling with a certain hardness that he had forgotten to give her back the change for their last night's meal, "but surely you must be rather expensive to live up to?"

While he spoke, she looked at him closely as though she were regarding some lifeless object, for he did not look at her or respond in any way. Not merely his body, but the meaning behind his words, the movements of his eyes, gave her the impression of stupidly swaying. She realized that he was very drunk. Yet just because he was so removed, because the appeals she made seemed as ineffective as prayers thrown up to a stone image and because his eyes never met hers, she had a further impression that he was playing on all this: with some other sense than sight he was watching her from unapproachable heights, he was making her accept his presents and forcing her to understand his meaning with a brutal directness that his drunkenness excused.

His face became expressionless for a moment, then he opened a flopping foolscap-size rectangle wrapped in brown tissue. It was an old peasant embroidery on faded muslin: the naive pattern of trees, birds, men

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and women in coloured silks and with slashes of gold, was sewn so that there was no back to it, on either side the stitching was the same.

"How lovely!" she exclaimed, falling on it eagerly as a most welcome diversion. She held it in both hands, matching it against her dress, "I shall keep it always. First of all I shall sew it on to a new dress. Thank you most awfully!" He did not say a word, but allowed her ecstasies to shriek past him whilst he mechanically fiddled with the other parcels.

Next he unwrapped an earthenware jug with two naked satyrs painted, one on either side. "Why did I get this jug? . . . Oh, yes, I remember. It stands for what you are afraid of. You are afraid of yourself as a vessel. That's bad. Heal thyself, physician."

"I never claimed I could heal anyone! Whom do you imagine I said I could heal?"

"Me," he peacefully uttered, "you know you promised me that, don't you?" He rolled back his head and met her on this with the glazed oblique stare of eyes which seemed to sink back amongst a haze of umber clouds.

"Dearest, please understand that I shall do anything in my power to help you. But when we joked about the prophetess, I never dreamed you seriously

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imagined that I could heal or save anyone. It would be disastrous to deceive ourselves about this."

Her vision dropped to his untidy mouth which momentarily appalled her. She clenched her fist with a little gesture of defeat familiar enough to those who had lain naked with her in bed, and then she sank back into a chair and looked out of the window which, like a huge lens, collected in a white space the shining colour of the sea and the peace of the islands.

As soon as she looked away from him, she had the sense that it was now he in his turn who looked at her, whilst she, staring out into the light, became abstracted like a stone. With bloodshot eyes and russet tufts of hair that seemed to burn through her, he must see that she was abjectly afraid. He must read her nagging fears about money, her puritanical tremors (after all, everything considered, she was the type of a new England school marm, with her culture, her economy, her primness, her love of being alone amidst beautiful and traditional scenery); deeper than all these surface agitations, a fear she now felt that perhaps, ultimately, she might prove indifferent to him when he needed her most. For she did not love him.

Their ridiculous pretence that they loved

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withered up like burnt straw in his gaze, and with it those words they had used, "dear" and "dearest"; the names she had called him "Faun. Lips, ears, eyes, mouth of a faun." With misery, she thought that it was she who lived on illusions for whom had she named with these words? Not this man, certainly. Even when drunk and bullying he was more dignified than the ridiculous pet she had invented as her lover.

He did not speak. She heard his hands fret with the string and shelled-off paper. She knew their movement was unconscious: that his head of blotched granite was bent towards her, with eyes that glowed and stared. But she was wrong: this was only her newest illusion when she looked again, so far from filling the room, she had an impression recalling her very first of him: that he was short and dapper, though tired from a sleepless night.

He was even rather pathetic, like a public man—a French politician—of small and slightly dishevelled appearance. In this role he had now reached the period when oratory is finished and the frock-coated groomed figure merely performs, with a rather impressive and moving clumsiness he presses the button to unveil a monument, or smacks mortar from a trowel on to a foundation stone.

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When she looked round once more, all the presents were unpacked, but he still continued standing behind the table, with his hands stretched out to touch each side of it in a gracious almost saintly attitude of one who has offered all. He had the appearance of a figure in a dream; for he had been as totally occupied in untying the parcels as are fantasies one with what they do, being the symbols invented by their own actions.

With the wordless pathos of such a phantom he turned round and walked out of the hut, only pausing a moment to take down and put on his trench-coat which he had left hanging by the door. She glanced at the presents spread out like a little Oriental city of copper coffee-pots, bulbous jewellery, jugs and leather shoes—domes and golden roofs and minarets—on the deal table; then she ran to the door, calling out. "Come back! Come back!" But when she reached it, the sight of him made her change her mind and turn back to the hut. He was walking not down the hill back to his room in the hotel, but uphill, away from the village and towards the main road that led to the town. He walked with an hallucinated stiffness, the movements of a sleepwalker greatly exaggerated. Dressed in the stiff inappropriate coat, he looked black against the brilliant



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landscape and seemed to belong to some more sombre and active climate. The path zig-zagged up the hill within the narrow breadth of the hotel garden walls, as far as the gate, so that, repeatedly turning to continue his z-shaped progress, he had more than ever the appearance of a clockwork machine. Once, when he reached the corner, he stumbled and fell over woodenly at full length; instantly, like a dumb-bell weighted at one end, he sprang up again with his body quite stiff and his hands clasped to his sides.

### THE MEETING ON THE ROAD

*As easily as cobweb the totally free  
Will of this man is blown along the mountain side.  
Legs may stumble against pits and stones  
Be snatched at by briars  
And difficulty may tap against the knee,  
But doom runs on elevated lines, its own,  
Is walled in, has trestles, and grooves for the eye  
To roll away from distraction of the sun  
Yellow on a million blades, crossed and recrossed  
Shadows on straw.*

*The convolutions of his doom  
Him wind, as a cotton thread leads; but not  
To light white on the wind-worn stone  
Of an outward porch, where the prophetic*

## *The Dead Island*

*Woman waits; but in-  
To the labyrinthine core  
Where the beast waits, which when it leaps  
Shall eclipse him in dark cold.*

*Watch how light is his levitation  
Up the mountain side! So undoubting that  
The spirit can rest in the machine it runs  
Or gaze out of windows at the moral track!*

My free mind, utterly released from every obligation to remember—to write to Dr. Rooth, to eat at certain hours, to talk to my friend, perpetually to feel ashamed—now delightingly toys with the thought that it is still possible for me to turn back. How easy to stop! There is no irresistible temptation that draws me on. No, I dally up this steep mountain, turning reasons over in my mind, thinking that this body I walk in could reverse, walk back to my hotel room, shut myself in, I could shut my mouth when I am offered wine; I could hold back my tongue from embarking on the cups.

In considering this, I taste the impossible. Why is to go back impossible? Because I am no longer tempted. I neither want nor resist the drug. The temptation is removed because I am at one with what compels me: I am the compulsion. One is only

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tempted when something in one resists. If I feel any temptation now, it is the amusing temptation to stop.

Penalties also have vanished. I no longer fear my own disapproval, I no longer crawl with admiration round the feet of the generous and the good, endeavouring to dissolve in the light and strength of their being. Nor do I desire to exchange their being with my own. I would not be she for worlds.

No, I am not ashamed. This is my final self. If they see me now they must accept me as I am. After all, this is the I whom they are willing to support, and for whom my other self perpetually pays and atones.

How do I feel? Thrilled and secret, because stripped of every covering, sham, obeisance, except the compulsion lifting me softly to death. I float: it is as though my body were stripped of flesh, bones, hair, eye-balls, that is, stripped of the bones that stand and slave and have their integrity, stripped of the eye that sees the entire universe subtracted from itself and must pay that great outsider compliments. Stripped to the lifeblood my heart, attached to a mesh of veins strung out like a harp, moves across the summer hills. No longer myself, I am singly my doom.

## *The Dead Island*

*All else but this was evasion Exist now no longer  
My two friends calling like gulls through a mist.  
My signal will had invented an arc,  
Which hard route I followed. That's all a dream.  
Now I have my own being and live like a bullet  
That fires the air conscious as it shoots into life.*

*My body will break against stones. . . .  
But my friends take care of me . . .  
The blows will brush out all the lights.*

He reached the dusty road and stared at his own feet, shambling over grindings of small stones and the larger stones that are split up by convicts. Horses trod where metal hooves had been driven, obediently as engines the horses wore their lines not under hoof and wheel, but as a steel bit in the mouth, as leather traces over haunch, the whip and bridle of the sun.

He looked up and saw, as if she were a hallucination, his friend. She was standing at the edge of the road, below him, looking out to sea. A breeze ruffled her hair and added keenness to her features: she wore her light prophetic mantle, and was standing so exactly as when he had once before seen her—and named her—that she seemed a living memory rather than herself.

She turned and looked at him, with a mild and kind glance “My love,” he thought. Then in an

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instant he forgot her. He stumbled on, stopping only to make water against a telegraph post.

Later, he remembered her once again. He laughed, for the thought of her became associated with a new view he had of himself. He imagined now not that his inebriety was compelled, but that his most violent excesses had always been accomplished. They existed within him, in the same way as a photograph that has been exposed in a camera is the negative, even before it has been developed. His time was spent in developing the excesses that were already spiritually exposed in him: and in a moment of luminous hatred he saw that she too was like a negative on which he had stamped a black and white photograph of evil, by their sexual act devoid of love.

She sat in her room with nothing to do but to think.

*Now shut the door and turn back to your room  
Woman, to the new-smelling string and paper  
Shelled from the parcels. Strip, strip  
Your surfaces unfolded on the time  
Like vapoured mercury in the bright appearance  
Offering a stunning eye and passionate pulse  
Strip to your final ghost What did he read  
Who read your self over your shoulder?*

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*Only a generous impulse like a whore's  
Leading repeatedly to disappointed beds,  
Ineradicable kindness that makes you weep  
When you consider how it sprouts evil shoots.*

*He on the hill strikes a pure line  
Leading to fire in the mind, and finally caverns  
Of disinterest, since death's no beggar  
Nor blackmailer either, for life and love.  
His excellence in excess has a clean eye  
That glides above a road white as a scar  
To vats where heroes drown. That eye rolls out  
Judgments shot through with arrows, like a saint's.*

*These, damn you, you accept, for here you meet  
Not Dionysus, not the drunken sun  
Bleeding across his final sea, but from that sea  
Your uninvited past steps and greets.  
Upon the shore what grotesque properties!  
The marriages, flats, dresses, concerts, friends,  
Straddled against the waves, like seaside villas  
With carrier balconies of London memories  
And sightless windows staring at salt winds!*

*O better far  
Than this deceiving life wearing forged shifts  
Of costume, and speaking  
Dead music, are the lives of those  
Who race to death. The nerveless  
Record breakers, who let their iron speed*

## *The Dead Island*

*Rattle its wave along Daytona Beach;  
The virtuosi of drink and sex;  
These are my dancers, sharers of my life.*

Later in the afternoon she started wandering again, she scarcely knew where; down to the terrace of the hotel where guests were bathing, or sitting in deck-chairs, reading, playing cards, drinking tea and talking, in the shade of a few pine trees. Political exiles in dressing-gowns read newspapers which were banned in their own countries. From the wooden bathing platform, built out from the terrace like a rough balcony over the sea, the water looked so clear that it seemed like varnish adding colour and translucency to shoals of darting fish swimming above sand and rocks on which the sunlight filtered like roarings of white steam. A boy from the village had moored a boat to the platform and occasionally dived from it in order to clear a stone from the sand near the diving-board. Without lifting his arms, he hunched over head first perpendicularly into the water; when he grasped a particularly large stone it anchored his head down, so that he had to crawl on the floor of sand, kneel, and then lift the stone above his head, in order to wrench it from the water. This boy was dark and sunburned from his work, his neck was cricked, and the slight bend with which he

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held his head to one side resembled so exactly the optical illusion by which a straight reed seems bent when standing half out of shallow water, that he was known as the "diver" more on account of the bend in his neck than because he did in fact dive for the stones. She left the terrace and walked towards the harbour past a bearded nomad from a Turkish village who had spread some coloured carpets on the pavement in front of the hotel, and hung others on a lattice fence: she could see holes of blue sky through those that were hung up. Here she met and greeted the simple-minded lithe hotel porter, who walked with a springing step and a smile on his broad mongol face. As she passed the quay of the small harbour, a sailing ship was being unloaded by five peasants whose dungarees, hands and faces were whitened by the cargo of meal. By the quayside the fat German-speaking boatman who took tourists out as far as the Dead Island, when the weather was particularly fine, waited. The demoniac old drunkard dressed in his perpetual blue dungarees, was snoring in a chair in front of the inn: he was the father of the diver.

So she walked on, rejecting the lives of her fellow-guests, invoking the landscape and the lives of the villagers. The rhythm of all these lives was set even



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the wandering seller of carpets measured his journeys in blank days, and then, when he reached a selling place, the blank days of travelling, during which his mind too was quite empty, were vessels filled by the day or even the hours during which he sold his carpets.

Her life had no certain rhythm. the future was a blank, the past a series of violent movements, so unrelated in time and place that she often forgot where and when they had been agitated. The logic of her life was not her life: it was the life of her husband, running violently under Northern skies, sending telegrams, leaving behind him some pages of an intimate journal: the life of a record-breaker, a pirate, or a dancer.

And there he stood, the record-breaker, her partner in the dance! The noise of a car passing had made her look up, to see that inadvertently she had reached the road. Wearing his trench-coat baked to the texture of a mud hut by the sun, and standing beneath the bony telegraph poles whose wires sagged as if to accept the pressure of a grieving and not a brilliant sky, he had the helplessly inadequate appearance of a tyrant, a distinguished visitor from another climate, who has just stepped out of his aeroplane. He looked at her with uncomprehending

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bewilderment, the unrecognizing straight look between the eyes of a figure on the screen. Quietly she met this ineffective glance, and for a moment she deeply pitied, felt that she could forgive and even love him. Instantly he moved on, stumbling up the road: paused only by a telegraph post to make water.

### THE MEETING IN THE HUT

She walked down the long dark corridor of the hotel which was illuminated only by a damp light soaking through frosted glass panels let into the upper half of each bedroom door. When she came to his door, it was locked. She tapped at it several times, finally rattling the glass panel. The panel was particularly dark, so she guessed that the shutters of his room must be closed.

With the same scarlike tautening of her lips and straining of her face as she had worn when climbing the mountain, she now clenched her fist, and raising it, banged it sideways against the upper door panel. The glass cracked and then fell clattering into the room. She put her hand (which was bleeding slightly) into the room and turned the key from the inside.

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He was lying stretched out on his bed, breathing heavily. The dark hot room stank of alcohol and sawdust. She at once opened the window and then the shutter, and leaning against the ledge so as to breathe the outside light and air, she looked at him. He was wearing black trousers, a stiff shirt and a white waistcoat. The tailed coat lay dishevelled on the floor. On the table by the bed there was an old-fashioned folding opera hat, exactly such a one as she had imagined him flapping open and shut when he sang a dance hit on the evening road, after their supper in the town.

He was staring at her. The centres of his eyes were dilated, which made the whites show plainly.

Breathlessly, as though she had been running, she sat on the edge of the bed and nursed her bleeding hand. "I saw you yesterday afternoon."

He raised his head and replied quietly "I wasn't out. I have been here all the time."

She laughed: "But you were wearing the trench-coat that's hung up on the cupboard. You were standing at the edge of the road above the village."

"I have been here all the time." Some demand of power or hatred—she could not tell which—was clinched by the lie. With a hard look—not at her, but just above her—he forced it on to her. Then in

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a different, childish voice, he added. "I have been ill."

She felt the misery of enduring a quite senseless debating defeat, in which justice was indubitably violated. She surrendered. "Are you better now?" she asked.

"Yes. I'm quite well. I shall be able to get up tomorrow."

"And this is all over?" she asked, looking round the disordered room.

"Yes, I want you to help me. I want to get into touch with Guiseppo Rooth. I can't live this down here " Like a breath of ozone the air became purified not with self-pity but with the restrained drama of a pity that seemed general. "I fly South with the swallows."

"Where will you go then?"

"To Egypt." From a dark rafted room she imagined the flight of a smooth and beautiful but isolated bird across the sea and above the scattered orange islands to the continent of warm sand.

"But first of all you are going to the Dead Island?"

"I must get up. I must send a wire to Dr. Rooth. Will you lend me enough money for the telegram? Guiseppo will repay you. He still has some pictures

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of mine which he can sell. The money will pay my way until I get to Egypt."

"But supposing all *this* happens again on the island?"

"I will go to Egypt."

"You mean that is *why* you'll go to Egypt. Because you know it's going to happen again?"

He did not reply. Then she asked. "Where did you come from before you were here?"

"From Paris."

"I thought, from Dr Rooth's letter to me, that you were coming direct from Vienna. I should have asked you. How silly of me! Were you looked after in Paris?"

"Well, you see for yourself that I had to come here."

"Did you have friends there?"

"People . . . yes, who were not so kind as you. There are people everywhere."

"And now you are bound to go from here! You have revealed yourself to me!"

"I thought", he said, "that I would be able to get through these few weeks without an attack, a relapse, a bout. . . . But perhaps things are better as they are. Now you can see what I'm really like. But don't look so tragically at me with those beautiful

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black prophetic eyes!" he said lovingly, and yet looking cruelly at her. "You are so good, so really good. Too good for this world and for your three husbands."

With a feeling of sickness, she immediately got up and left him when he said this, feeling, as she went, that his eyes were all the time on her. Once more he had by dramatizing her appearance given her the feeling that in reality it was not she who with a horrified yet pitiful gaze stood above and stared down at him in the abyss, but it was he who looked down on her and had laid bare her suffering. With the same pressure as he had insisted on her accepting a lie which they both knew to be a lie, he had now thrown down between them the fact of her flat goodness, which rang with the chink of pure loud coin.

Now it seemed to her that the fact he had exposed and so pressed on her was that really she hated him just as, finally, she had hated them all, and as she hated her husband. Well, then, she would accept it: she did hate him. As she walked up the garden through the clean air and sunlight back to her hut she recognized another fear which had haunted her all these days. It was that she would come home from a walk and find that in some horrible way he

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had broken into and ruined her hut. Now she had another vision. she hoped that when she next went to his room she would find him lying on the floor, dead.

In spite of herself, this vision grew in her mind. She imagined the various ways in which he might commit suicide: that he could shoot himself in his room, or in the garden; or could drown himself, or throw himself from a cliff on the mountains. She thought how simple it would be, after he was dead, to explain his death to the American Consul. So far from seeming horrible, his death seemed to her a quiet and straightforward remedy to restore her peace of mind.

The next morning there was a knock at the door of her hut, and he came in. He looked more ill than ever, and he was so exhausted that he could scarcely stand. He sat down and wordlessly held his head in his hands.

She stood and looked down at him with a contempt she did not try to conceal, while she asked sharply: "Have you heard from Dr. Rooth?"

"That is what I came in about. I came to tell you that I haven't sent the wire."

"Why not?"

"I spent the money."

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She realized his ruse to get money out of her and why he had needed the money. A moment later, she painfully saw that perhaps it was a ruse he himself had hardly been conscious of he had probably really wished to send the telegram. The tortuosity of his mind which turned his whole life to a lie, so that his relationship with her even when he was sober had, in a sense, always been a ruse, a kind of exalted confidence trick, to produce the present situation, so disgusted her that as she looked at him, once more she imagined him collapsing, or killing himself in front of her eyes: she would be very glad. She thought of him as dead already: she did not attempt to hide what she was thinking.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of his voice, which seemed very far away. "Look here, you can get me out of this jam."

"*What?*" she started violently, and looked at him. He had drawn his chair up to the table, and he was fingering some slices of meat on a plate which she had put out for her lunch. One of the slices, slobbered over, hung partly out of his mouth like a sweating dog's tongue. He made an effort to finish eating it. Then he said: "I have eaten nothing for three days."

"What did you say before that?"

He frowned. Then he repeated, recalling the



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words with difficulty and saying them as though they were meaningless: "You can get me out of this jam."

Their eyes really met on this for the first time since he had been drunk, she recognized in his the persistent pressure of a calculation he had made.

"How at this moment I hate and despise you! How you humiliate me!" Her bitter words were no longer directed at him—he seemed to her an inanimate object—but at every human entanglement she had ever had. She said them exactly as a woman may repent that she has ever borne children.

Their hatred, directed not at each other but at themselves, isolated them in a loneliness beyond mere anger. Freezing in this final loneliness, they could forgive and turn back to each other with a certain gentleness.

As though to thaw them back into a world where their words meant something, and were not merely the revealed and biting frost of their common atmosphere, he translated his own phrase, now dead and belonging to another time. "You know that you can save me." She shook her head, smiling gently with the tears in her eyes. "You know that I can't."

She started walking up and down as though to warm herself with violent gestures of the crossing and

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uncrossing arms, in their log hut, now situated at the freezing pole. Finally she broke her pace beside him and bending over him touched his head with both her hands. Smiling into his eyes, she asked: "Why don't you kill yourself?" He smiled childishly back at her.

At the other end of the room, by the side window that looked out on the upper part of the garden, she laughed with the gaiety of those remote regions to which they had come, and asked: "Well, why don't I kill myself too?"

He leaned forward and said seriously "I have tried that many times. But the point at which I could commit suicide is several points beyond the one at which I take to drink, so I have never reached it."

"I think we understand one another. Perhaps that's why I can't help you, strange as it may seem. I have learnt a great deal from you in these few weeks: I ought to be very grateful for that; indeed am: I thank you. Amongst other things, I've learnt that I never really understood my husband. When one really understands people, one sees them as quite separate from oneself, as running in their own grooves, so one doesn't imagine that one can 'save' them. Why did I ever imagine that I could 'save'

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anyone? Because you were quite right in knowing that I did *mean* that. I suppose, because I thought I could draw him into the sphere of my own life, and give him my life, my will. The fact is, that when one can no longer love, one finds—with what relief—that one can still give. One can pity. One can only save another person by giving oneself too completely, by living his life for him, and then, finally, one destroys him and oneself as well. One pities individuals because one doesn't understand them; one pities them because they do not resemble oneself. I think it's much better for you to live your own life: shoot yourself, throw yourself from the highest tower, if you like. It is your own life, and now I understand that, I can even respect you, odd as that seems too. What I've learnt from you, then, is that I have to live my own life; because finally the habit of saving people becomes in itself a kind of drug: one feels one cannot exist unless there is someone to save: a stage even comes when one asks oneself if it isn't as weak to give as to take, because giving and taking have become the same. Those whom one saves are oneself, and there is nothing outside oneself, not even that which is to be saved."

When she finished talking, she had sat down, no longer thinking of him, but selfishly of her own life.

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She was aware that a machinery of anxiety, revolving automatic questions of unhappiness and doubt, which were quite outside her control, had started in her mind. Just as much as he, she had "relapsed": in that, they were alike.

Yet strangely enough the very conversation that most disturbed her, restored him to a state of mind that seemed almost normal. He revived when she, for the moment, gave way. He paced up and down the room with a light, business-like tread. In a voice full of hope and conviction, he said: "I don't want you to bother about me. I'll go off as soon as Dr. Rooth has sent me the money." He fumbled in his pocket and produced two dirty envelopes. "Before I left Paris, I got these introductions to people on the island. They are very nice people, I believe. I shall be able to start there, again, but I will have to have my dress clothes pressed and cleaned. Yesterday I got them rather dirty. Will you be so kind as to write to Dr. Rooth? Tell him as gently as possible that *it* has happened; he will know what you mean. It will upset him, but he has to know. Then he will send you the money, and he will ask you to pay my bill with it, and not to give me the change until I am on the boat. He is quite right, of course. All this, you see, has happened before."

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to the islands; I shall go to Egypt, always you know what will happen. I will step out of the train, boat or aeroplane, just like any ordinary tourist, but then sooner or later, the guests, drinking their coffee and liqueurs on the terraces of the hotel, facing the air, sea, or road, will find that these are my stage, and that I am an entertainer, surprising them always by the disgraceful last act of my little performance, in which I disappear. There are only two acts in this drama: my arrival on the first day and my departure on the last! The days when I remain at any place are only an *entr'acte*—and there of course I deceive my audience, a fact which they discover sooner or later, and which they do not easily forgive.

“Yet, my dear, forgive me if I treasure and count over my days of rest with you. With you I experienced something different from the usual seasonal extravagances of my entertainment, for I learnt to care for you—with your dark prophetic gaze—your light blue cape over your yielding shoulders—your face turned towards the breathing sea—more than I care even for my illness. This was something I had scarcely hoped was possible; it almost saved me.

“To me life is only bearable when the mind and the body are in harmony, and there is a natural balance between them, and each has a natural respect for the

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other. I could no more waste my body on a low stupid person—than I could waste my mind on low stupid conversation. We all want fundamentally to be faithful to ourselves but unnoticeably without excitement and noise—we forget—and usually it is something so utterly unworth while which makes one forget.

“Oh, but the remembering is living Now, when I am writing this, I can remember. When we had coffee that first night on the terrace—the islands like bronzed palm leaves at rest on the shining bay—our first walk past the tiny harbour with the tables set out and the men sitting under the unreal glare of the petroleum lamp—the mornings when I tidied up your hut—the evening when we went fishing in the harbour: our boat sliding on the immense black shining mass of the water fringed by the tented sky; and the fish rising to the lamps, just as huge moths are drawn to the lamp outside the restaurant. When we did all these things, they were complicated for me, since I could not think of them simply as excursions, they were willed acts of my memory I was remembering life.

“At the end, on the last evening, with before my eyes the ideal, the perfect harmony of mind and body, achieved through our two bodies, then quite

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suddenly the light went out and I forgot. My will failed, I could no longer make myself remember: I had lost my memory. And when we say that someone has lost his memory, we mean—you must have read such cases in the newspapers—that he becomes anonymous. He forgets his name, the village where he was born, the glance of his mother gathering up his whole world where it begins: in other words, he becomes completely identified with his fate, he is simply the doom that wanders over the earth, or the plot that leads to revolutions.

“I will go away and fight this out. The doctors say that if I can hold out for six months I shall be cured. I know that I can do it. Then we shall meet again under a happier star. The view from the hill on the Dead Island—above the golf course—is indescribably beautiful, I am told: you see hundreds more islands from there, and the sea adding up its immense sum in the gulf many miles away. Then I shall go to Egypt. I hope Guiseppo Rooth will join me there. But it will be a hard and lonely struggle. Please write again to Rooth and say how *urgently* I need money. If Guiseppo has none, I do not know what I shall do. If only I can live quietly and *respectably* on the Dead Island, I shall be accepted by the people there as one of themselves, and then I *know* that I

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shall win this battle. It is all now a question of *money*. How shall I manage?

“Good-bye, little black cat, with as many lovers as lives, go away and be happy. You will forget me very soon, and these days will seem like a dream from which you have awoken. You have won your battle already. Go back to the North, for your decisions are made.”

Two days later, she received the following, in answer to her letter, from Dr. Rooth:

“My dear friend, I was so upset when I received your letter that I could not sleep for two nights, and you will see from this that even now my hand is trembling. It is impossible for me to say how sorry I am for what has happened! I had so prayed that your month with my friend would pass off quietly; but, equally, it is impossible to deny that I feared this might happen.

“You ask why I gave you no warning. The reason is quite simple: if I had warned you, you would quite rightly and naturally have refused to undertake the responsibility of looking after this poor, suffering boy. I was driven then to dissemble, because I have looked after him now for three years, I



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have exhausted my strength and my resources, and now I can care for him no longer. During the last two years we have tried everything, including nursing homes and doctors. If doctors cannot help him, then it seems that he must wander through the world appealing to those who are strong enough to aid him with their wills. No one can give his will for long. I gave mine for three years, and, whereas he was strengthened, I became exhausted from wearing his illness in my own sympathetic being.

"Whatever you feel now, I know that one day your generous heart will forgive him; I think too that you will forgive me when you understand that I could only save myself from material and mental ruin by this deception. After all, the three years during which I have suffered justify me in asking you to sacrifice three weeks.

"I shall now outline the story of the last three years. It is very simple, and you will understand it from what you have seen. I was introduced to him in London by a common friend. At that time he was in great trouble: he had been driven from the revue in which he was dancing successfully, on account of his drinking. From the moment when I first met him I felt a special sympathy for him, which in a sense flattered me, for I truly thought I must be the

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only person in the world who could understand a nature touching in its faith and simplicity, unhappy only because he believed that some doom had made everything good in the world *outside* himself.

"He learnt to trust and accept me. I sincerely believe that for two years he made a supreme effort, or shall I say that in blind and absorbing trust he accepted my supreme effort? He did not drink at all. So I still believe; yet there were weeks during those two years when I did not see him—when he went to stay with a friend—and sometimes, in view of what finally happened, I shake to think that something was concealed from me during those weeks of absence.

"The disaster occurred here in Vienna. One day he disappeared. I thought little of this and would have waited patiently for perhaps a week, feeling sure that he would appear again, had I not discovered by chance that my cash box was robbed. Then I hunted through all my flat, and I found bottles of drink hidden under the clothes in his cupboard.

"Soon after this the police wrote to me. He had gone with my money to Trieste. During the journey he must partly have recovered. Horrified at his betrayal, when he reached Trieste, he simply drank himself, not into forgetfulness but into what I can only call a state of second personality. This second

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personality—which was not my dear boy—then robbed a bank of a great deal of money. He went to a brothel and simply scattered the bank-notes amongst the prostitutes. After that he became ill, and for a few days lost all memory of what had happened.

“It was the worst day of my life when I heard this news. I seriously thought that I myself should perhaps commit suicide. My dear friend, I thought that by doing this I could still give him another chance. I could spare him the living obsessive presence of my knowledge.

“But there were practical things to do. The first—the repayment of the money and the arrangements with the police—cost me literally every penny of my capital. That was easily paid. The second was to prove to him that I still believed in him, even when he didn’t believe in himself. He had to insult me, so that he could see that even when trampled on, I still loved him. Finally, it grew worse. He had to show me that he drank, in order to prove that I could endure that. His life became, in fact, an illustrated confession of everything that horrified him in himself; I was made to share the horror with him, in the hope that I would reassure him. We had fulfilled a cycle, an age, as it seemed, during which love had estab-

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lished a chaste and precarious balance—an ice age of purity. Now we had entered another circle: and this was madness.

“You may say that I should have given him my life. At this stage, that would have pleased him. But, alas, had I done so it still would not have saved him. I understand this so well, that I can forgive him freely. It had become his passion to destroy me.

“You will see now that I have spent three years thinking of this one case, so perhaps some of my conclusions will seem a little fanciful, undoubtedly I have wasted my time, but still I offer them for what they are worth. They amount simply to this: that his behaviour expresses an intuition of a destructive spirit which really exists in the world in which we live.

“Consider the development of his illness. Firstly, one notices that Time is not important to it in the same way as his personality is absorbed in a world of its own, so it lives in a rhythm of its own. His cycle may extend over a period of three years or of five weeks; but it is one day to him. The same thing happens to him on every one of these hooped and caulked-in days. He does not trust himself in the morning; in the afternoon, with lucid faith he believes completely in some other person; he invites

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that person simply to live his own life for him. This, in the evening, is achieved.

“Yet the very success of the person who loves and tries to save him contributes to the final collapse of the arrangement, since his real self still exists, outraged and hovering between him and the saviour a complete transference would simply be an exchange of personalities, in which case, you for example, would become the inebriate, and he would become the idealized leader whom he imagines you to be. When he and the person who is helping him both realize that this is what he wants, the situation collapses. Then he is driven to the most desperate tactics of his night making one accept him and love him when he is at his very worst, and when he can even enjoy despising one for doing so.

“Now I have said—and indeed it seems gratefully obvious—that he is shut out from the surrounding world, because he lives in this closed-in world he has created for himself. Yet another though terrible way of expressing this is to say that he *is* the world, or that in him a very important part of our world reveals itself. In him is incarnated the moment when a civilization really begins to lose grip, when violence becomes an end in itself, history rushes, the boundaries of nations alter so rapidly that there is an in-

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flation in the printing of maps, the bristling turreted forms of Gothic cathedrals suddenly live again in the swirling forms of battleships with their cargo of destruction and hell copied from the nightmares of mediæval artists. Professors write to the newspapers advising ministers to convert the museums into railway stations and munition factories. Art is hoarded away where it is least valuable, in the minds of artists who cannot express themselves: it no longer streams over the lives of cities.

“Where there is tyranny and fear, nothing is created. How, then, shall one condemn an artist who, being unable to create, lives in his own being, the poem, the dance, the madness, which he apprehends from the world around him? The difference between art and madness or intoxication is this. the artist projects and re-creates outside himself a world of ideas which he puts in order: the madman or the inebriate *is* a world of disordered ideas.

“I run on. What I say is beyond my own experience. Well, you will have guessed that in this I am writing a good deal about myself; that I am explaining not this poor boy’s but my own failure. So this is my own experience, sometimes, when I have watched him in the last year repeat the same circle of idealized belief, orgiastic despair, insult and

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collapse, I have thought that I watched the anguish of my own country, and a deeper anguish in my own heart, I have understood why I myself can only write a German prose which is pastiche-wretched stuff that I throw into the waste-paper basket. You see, I can only turn back to another century; if I lived in the present, or looked forward, I would not be able to create. Perhaps I would *live*; then I would be like him.

“And for this boy there are the moments, the weeks even, of happiness, when the intoxicated dancer strips himself at night at the edge of the sea and swims far out into the darkness. The moon is above him and makes a shatterable metallic path on the water. He does not see the water, he only sees his own at-last-delicious limbs, and feels the contact of cold around the whole surface of his body which is like a hard bright husk. For once his ambition is fulfilled: he is a perfect machine. With wires and nerves communicating from every surface, he cruises softly round as sensitively as a submarine. Before turning home he wonders whether to swim along the path of the moon, until the water drowns him. for the prolongation of his moments of happiness would be the oblivion of death.

“There is nothing more to say, except good-bye

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and thank you. Your trial is now almost at an end, but I have still one small request. Lend him enough money for his fare and a month's rent at the hotel on the island. I will repay you. Take his ticket, then put him on the boat and give him no money until it is about to leave, just as you suggested in your letter. Then leave him.

"Brandy is very cheap on the island. All one can hope is that his suffering will not be too great."

### THE FINISH

In the next days there were three more figures of the dance—

(1) After their conversation in the hut, he went to a café in the village and exchanged his raincoat for a bottle of schnapps.

(2) Then, when he had no money left, and when everything he could pawn had been taken away from him, he stole a bottle of methylated spirits out of the cellar and drank that.

(3) On his last morning at the hotel, everything else that was drinkable having been removed, he drank the whole of a bottle of hair oil.



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### THE FRESH START

They were taken in a car to the town, an hour before the boat was due to leave. He was too ill to walk or eat there, so she went with him directly to the boat, and reserved one of the two or three cabins on deck for the use of rich people even on so short a journey. The boat was full of people of a kind with whom she had been familiar, but now she recognized them with the same shock as a traveller who has left civilization sees on his return a motor bus or a shilling. The women with white faces, precisely painted lips, and eyelashes touched with a brush so that each lash was singled out as if under a magnifying glass; with gleaming teeth and sparkling or stony or rolling eyes, and with hair also exaggerated in every straight or curling or coloured idiosyncrasy; these women, glittering and ticking like a display of watches in a Bond Street shop window, stared at her with a familiar insolence, an interested and interesting glance which they reserved for one of their own "set", or for their mirrors. From the crowd one of them ran forward with a little cry, the amplified shriek of a field insect: "Oh, darling!" and she was immediately

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plunged into a chatter the threads of which were picked up across time and place from an autumn evening years before in New York, so that the talk sparked as if wires had been connected and as if their voices lay at the bottom of the sea, enclosed in ocean cables and speaking from city to city. The expensive chatter transported here by ships and laid at the feet of the mountains, ended with an ecstatic: "So I hear you have definitely left your husband, you know we call him the millionaire hitch-hiker."

She gasped, smiled: "I'm afraid I must look after my friend. He has been ill. May I introduce you?" and she introduced him to a whole crowd. He had shaved, and he livened up a great deal when he was introduced. The impression he made was as noticeable and dazzling as the image in a fly's eye of one bright object. She had the impression of seeing his face in a hundred cells and at a number of angles, and all of these images showed the same polished handsomeness.

"Well, dear, I think you'd better rest."

"Leave me, I'm all right." She took him firmly by the arm and led him across the deck. As she held his arm, she noticed a springiness in his step which she had never remarked before. "Thank you most awfully, dear," he said, "you mustn't worry about

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me. I guess I'm going to have a fine time. I liked those people to whom you just introduced me. I think we'll get along all right together." There was an enthusiasm in his voice which produced a tone deeper than the mere accent of forced bravery. When they reached the cabin door, he turned round and held her hand in both of his. He looked at her and once more she had the odd impression that he was looking down, this time rather patronizingly, even mockingly: there shone in his eyes the preoccupation of some really trivial impatience. She thought that under his breath he must be humming a dance hit which he would dance with one of the "crowd".

"Well, I suppose I should be going. You'd better lie down and rest."

"I don't want to keep you. I know you have a lot to do when you get back. I've been nuisance enough already. But you needn't worry about me. I'm going to be all right." There was a note of evasion in his voice; as he spoke his eyes uncontrollably wandered towards the people on the main part of the deck.

There was no doubt that she was keeping him away from these people for time which he could ill spare her. She followed his yearning gaze at the

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"crowd" to which she herself in many ways belonged: the ever-drunks, the drug-addicts, the people with sexual lives as complex as a logarithm table. To him these people were normal it was she who was abnormal. They were the *corps de ballet* in whose arms he could gracefully swoon he could fight them or seduce them or die on them without disgrace: they expected it.

"By the way," he said, suddenly recollecting himself, "there is something which I have meant to tell you. I have not done so before, because it concerns my dearest friend. But since I myself asked you to correspond with Dr. Rooth—I don't know whether he has written to you, except to send the money—I think I ought to warn you that he isn't entirely normal. Poor man, he has suffered a great deal he is subject to terrible migraine and for that reason he sometimes takes something to numb the pain. The result is that he lives in a world more of fantasy than of reality. For example, when I was with him he grew quite unreasonably jealous of me. Then he began to imagine things: I had an attack of my illness, and he took it too seriously: the things he thought weren't true. Although I never loved him any less, finally, on account of this jealousy, I had to go."

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She went. She left the boat and lingered at the quayside for a moment, watching him still stand by the cabin door. He came forward to the railing of the deck and waved good-bye. Then she moved away. Before she left the quay and walked back through the town, she looked once more. He was still standing on deck, looking at the other passengers. His muscular, supple figure was obviously that of a dancer turned towards a group into which, a moment later, he will not so much run, as dive.

She returned to the hotel and immediately gave notice that she would leave for Vienna the next day. Then, from her hut, she wrote to her husband asking him to divorce her. Having done this, she could not imagine why she had not written before.

Later in the evening she walked for the last time along the coast, past the cypresses and the packed bushes near the water, from the shade of which she had often before heard the nightingales singing. To-night their song was as beautiful as ever and the few seconds during which she paused to hear them seemed timeless, and yet were not timeless but measured merely against an instant of her total life. And thus every sensation betrayed and would continue to betray; for the nightingales' song, illusion of the Dionysiac lover, the poem, all these were outsiders,

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invocations that could wonderfully draw her out at moments and plunge her into timelessness, yet though she could take refuge in them they could never become her or, indeed, become anything except themselves: they would not live her life for her.

For the last time she climbed the hill and, as she walked, by a beautiful habit of her mind, she dismissed her own problem and thought instead of the appalling loneliness of the young man who had set out to the Dead Island, to Egypt, to his death.

She reached a high place from which she had a view of the islands. There was a half-moon whose light transformed the high clouds to transparent white fleece against a sky that was dark, and yet stabbed through and through with rays of light. The sea was as flat as on the night when they had gone fishing, but now, on account of its brightness there were no fishermen competing against the moon with their lamps. The islands lay like dark metal in a pool of the engraved sea. The wide bay was fringed by black mountains, and by the low shore, dark where there were bushes, gleaming where fields caught the white.

She looked across the bay towards the islands, feeling that she could never take in so much beauty.

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Not only did she feel the pain of struggling against the suffocating boundaries of her narrow senses, but another more joyful awareness disturbed her, like the tapping of a drum in the dark. For everything seemed washed in newness: the mystery of the scene had merged into unreality, and she gazed at it with removed eyes, the eyes of a traveller who, having already departed, is looking back upon yesterday.

Behind the hill of the Dead Island, across woods leading down to rocks, there was a dark red shadow. The only lights were on the shore, from the terrace of the hotel. Then across the still sea she could hear very faintly the music of a dance band. She imagined him wearing his dress clothes and dancing; she saw his masked expression of faint superiority directed with a mixture of love and hatred across the bay towards her.

Yes, as she turned away from the bay and looked for once towards the North, shut off from her by the great wall of the stone mountains, she could no longer feel that he was alone. On the contrary, all the people with whom he now joked and danced were fundamentally the same as he. Their life was a competition of roaring speeds rushing towards the farcical destruction which was their winning post,

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and excusing themselves by subtle advertisements appealing to tolerance and pity.

Nor could she escape this life, their life, by travelling to a further coast, or to the remotest islands. *They* went first to the small islands. If she were isolated, they still had the power to shatter her like a wave, when after the nightingales' singing she heard the mad voice shouting in the mountains.

She lay down on the warm dry earth; she had the sense of cities lying to the North under the all-covering European night, cities domed by an opaque atmosphere smudged through by artificial light, cities hammering with their traffic against their own foundations. She remembered other kinds of life, not the lives of these people. Her mistake was fundamental and could not now be altered. She had imagined that he, her husband, the Dionysian, was the traveller whose endurance one must admire and pity; but his world was always the same, always static, always crowded. She herself was the explorer. The dead are heaped together. But the living are alone. They are continually being forced to alter their lives.



# THE COUSINS

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# THE COUSINS

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## I

Werner was dazed by the airy white room whose tall windows with window seats on either side of the bow window opened directly on to the cropped lawn, the discreetly modern portraits sketched in thick blues and ochres, on the walls; the wide fireplace; the sense of new summer dresses and fresh faces, like repeated shafts of advertising light.

As though they were illuminated from all sides in the white room by the suffused light of a brilliant cloud, he noticed his two cousins Bob, with his shirt collar unbuttoned, was leaning against the mantelpiece and chuckling at some joke which did not completely hold his attention, for his narrowed smiling eyes were turned with an expression of more immediate curiosity towards Werner himself. Standing by the window at the same end of the room as his brother, as though within the radius of

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his influence, was Tom, whose smile of welcome was single and shining. The fact that Bob was older was evident in more than the obvious difference in their ages: not only was Tom a schoolboy, and in every way small where Bob was evidently an overgrown young man who had just stepped into the business world, but most oddly of all one was struck by Bob's immaturity, whereas the boy of sixteen seemed assured. Bob laughed too loudly when his eyes were serious, and his gestures were angular and self-conscious, without being clumsy. If one had met him in the city, one would have noticed that he carried his rolled umbrella like a shotgun and that his dark clothes were a creeping fog encroaching on the fading tan of his sportsmanship.

Werner paused, meeting his cousins' gaze, and taking in the environment within this tank: tufted sea-anemone society women, stupefied crabs or alert lobsters in the forms of dressy old men, female titled sponges, one or two young and darting bronzed minnows breasted with coloured pullovers.

He had stood there at least thirty seconds, when a more lively inquiry of Bob's expression and a seriousness of Tom's seemed to criticize him. He turned round and noticed his hostess's outstretched hand, travelling jerkily, as though pulled by wires,

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towards him. It was a small but open, boyish hand, active and unexpectedly lined. Its touch roused him. He stared into her black eyes, and met the response of the smiling mouth. Lady Helen could wear tweeds and she evidently played golf. There was a grace and candour about her preserved boyishness, a real freshness still, which made Werner judge her looks rather as what they had been than as what they were. She said in a sharp, quick but attractive voice: "I'm so glad you've been able to come. I'm afraid there's a frightful mob here at present. But they'll be gone after tea. We're dying to talk to you. Tell me, why is it that we haven't met more often? We seem to know so little about each other. After all, you and the boys are cousins, why aren't you tremendous friends? I'm so curious about you; and so are the boys. I warn you that we shall pester you. Now that we have met, let's see a lot of each other. In future you must come down here whenever you like, and treat this place as home. Do tell me something about yourself now. What are you most interested in, to start off with?"

With her cup squarely held in front of her, and her legs astride, she fired off these questions and remarks, most of which touched him deeply, so that he was quite grateful that she left him no time in

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which to reply. She herself seemed to realize that she had, in a few seconds, touched on a number of embarrassing topics, so that in making the conversation a monologue she spared his feelings, and, at the same time produced an appearance of great frankness, bordering on intimacy.

But to this question "What are you interested in?" he rather awkwardly inserted a reply.

"I am interested in poetry," he exclaimed, with an altogether foreign—a German—warmth and lack of tact.

She stared at him, her eyes widening slightly but preserving their smile, in a glance which he took for admiration.

"How interesting! Then whose poetry do you get most out of—I mean, who is your favourite poet?"

"Hölderlin, most certainly!"

"But how exciting! This is something quite new to me. How glad I am. How excellent you and the boys will be for each other! But I have to own that I have never even heard of Hölderlin—is that the name? Who is he?"

"He is a German poet, a contemporary of Goethe. I have translated some of his poems, so I can give you an idea of his style:

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*'Hang with yellow pears  
And full with wild roses  
The land in the lake,  
You holy swans,  
And, drunk with kisses,  
Steep your heads  
In sober and pious water.*

*Alas, where shall I take  
When it is winter, the flowers, and where  
The sunshine  
And shadows of the earth?  
The walls stand  
Speechless and cold, in the wind  
Clatter the flags.' "*

When he stopped speaking she was looking at him with a certain amazement. He was delighted to have surprised her when he caught her admiring murmur of "Beautiful, beautiful. Are you a poet too?"

Before he had time to answer, she had looked away; he turned also, to catch the friendly smiles of Bob and Tom, who were watching them. Bob's smile was quizzical, Tom's anxious, and Werner felt that they had been watching him while he was talking to their mother. In speaking the poem he had forgotten himself, but now with suddenly height-

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ened self-awareness he saw a portrait of himself reflected in Bob's cynical expression: this Werner was bony, with light hair, a dreamy look, overlaid with traces of anxiety in a certain fussiness of the brow, veiling the clear eyes and high forehead as wire netting overlays a grass lawn, he had altogether a too intense expression, which Bob must label his "German" look. As for the younger boy, Werner realized too during his moment of vision, when his eyes stared with an added vagueness, how a young Etonian, who during the holidays lived in a dream of sport and motor cars, must view him.

An angel seemed to be passing over the house, for the guests, except for a clicking of cups, were momentarily silent.

"I say, boys," Lady Helen said, her voice a shade deeper, "he's a highbrow! He'll do you no end of good! He's just what they need," she now chuckled, expanding to the guests. "My boys never open a book, you know, unless it's by Edgar Wallace, or unless they have to."

Bob smiled. With his legs wide apart and his eyes glistening as though they were lit by the sun in the open air, he seemed in a field and catching a ball.

"I think it's us who'll cure him!" he said, and then, having taken up the words from his mother, he



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directed his golden glance at Werner. "We'll make you read Edgar Wallace."

"Detective novels are so obscure," said Werner in a voice that was suddenly affected.

Tom now stepped into the little group by the window. "I say, what games do you play?"

"Well, I play chess."

At this they all laughed, with relief, as though they had been wanting to laugh for some time. Although they laughed at him, they seemed to invite him to begin playing at once the little game of family catch which they were so enjoying.

Bob twisted his feet slightly, standing back on his heels. He seemed to stretch, and as he did so his smile also stretched a little wider.

"Of course," he grinned, "like all his family, cousin Werner's ghastly mad!"

Werner drew himself up stiffly and said plainly and with dignity: "If you mean that my stepfather has had to be shut up, that is so "

"I didn't mean anything of the sort," Bob cried, flushing. "I never even knew. I say, I must have said something dreadful . . . I'm most awfully sorry, cousin Werner."

His mother came to the rescue, almost gaily. "Don't you mind anything either of them say.

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They're both silly chatterboxes. The only trouble with all of us", she added more seriously, but still on her light note, "is that we know too little about each other." She was looking away when she said this, gauging her other guests, with a divided but competent attention. Now she looked straight at him. "The boys know nothing whatever about you or your family history. That's why they're liable to say silly things." She quashed Bob's remark, and at the same moment she had warned him that they knew nothing. Her disciplinary movement swung her (like a golfing stroke) back to her guests. She drove away from the fireplace into the centre of the room. "Tennis," she exhorted loudly. "Who'll go out and play tennis?"

The dresses in the room expanded and unfolded like a fan. The fan shut again into a thin line, pushed through the open bay window, and then unfolded to its widest, most creaking expanse in the garden. The scrum of politicians in a far corner broke up and hurried to take up a new position on the lawn.

Bob waited by the fireplace with a smile on his face, like a delighted electrician illuminating the stage manager's most dazzling effects. He was now quite unembarrassed, and, in a warm voice, which contained a new note of curiosity and interest, he

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murmured. "I say, I'm awfully sorry." He put his hand on Werner's shoulder and gave him a reminding shove towards the lawn. He grinned again and added: "But you are different from us completely. So perhaps I'm right after all." When he said this, Werner noticed under the warm skin the movement of tender bones at the base of his neck: there was a nervous, spilt eagerness about them which reminded him of the whole family. "Well, you go on out," said Bob, "Tom and I must go up and change into flannels."

## II

Standing in the low, old-beamed and white-washed bedroom which had been given him, Werner was already spellbound.

Not that he had capitulated in the least. More than ever he felt that he represented international Socialism and the arts, in fact he had the exhilarating sense that he, as the New World, rather added tone to the Old, just as a labour Prime Minister, a royal guest at Windsor, tying up his black tie, may suddenly find that he fits perfectly into the tradition of the royal household.

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Everything about the house, this bedroom, the lawn and the pond which he saw from the window, the slightly vulgar portraits on the wall, the guns in the lobby, seemed suddenly to assert new standards, of which he had never dreamed. They were not to be judged in themselves; they were creative, alive, part of the personality of the whole house. Money no longer seemed to him vulgar, but perhaps the only means of escaping vulgarity. His Socialism immediately called for incomes of at least one thousand pounds a year. Rules which censored all good art and compelled everyone to read Edgar Wallace seemed to him necessary. In this mood, he quoted to himself a well-worn passage from T. E. Hulme's *Speculations*. "Order is thus not merely negative, but creative and liberating. Institutions are necessary."

He went down to dinner in a state of mind which, strictly, was like intoxication.

When he entered the drawing-room, where they were waiting for him, he was struck, as he became often struck—it was part of his wonder at them—by the sense of a pause in their manners. They seemed, for a few seconds, in a kind of disarray, as though they were simply waiting for him, before they laughed, chattered, and all contributed to a music

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which was as charming as a Mozart serenade. It was the more striking because the other guests were already present, and surely should have been entertained. For a moment Werner thought that his tie must be crooked. Already they had accustomed him to feeling, when he was with them, that something was wrong with his clothes. He touched it with his hand, only to find that it was straight, and this gesture—as when a conductor lifts his wand—released them. They started to talk; Helen to welcome him, the others amongst themselves, as though to spare him some embarrassment.

The two other guests were a short, red-faced major, and his wife, a woman with a face like a kind, well-bred nag. Her thick bronzed hair shone vigorously, her teeth protruded, and, when she smiled her flat lips curled back to show her solid gums.

Werner's uncle, Lord Edward, was also there. He was a tall dignified man, with dark greying hair and cropped black moustache, whose friendly manner rather emphasized than hid his air of preoccupation, his readiness in the middle of a conversation suddenly to frown and become absorbed in his own thoughts. His eyes stared rather, thoughtfully and abstractedly—like Werner's—but there were heavy,

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superficially-imposed lines from his nostrils to the corners of his mouth, and a creasing of the flesh around his mouth and chin, which revealed that his cares were of the city. He welcomed Werner with a smile that seemed at the same time to acknowledge and recognize him. Werner soon found himself surprised that they were taking his ideas so seriously: for the effect of their style and wealth was to make everything they gave their attention seem relatively unimportant: his own world shrunk under their compliments so far that he even wished to spare them the trouble of admiring it.

During the meal Lord Edward and Major Penn did all the talking, whilst Werner and the boys and their mother remained quietly listening, as members of the family who did not have to be entertained should do.

They talked, of course, about their experiences in India, and big-game hunting.

The little major had sat in the forked boughs of a tree, peering through trailing leaves and twisted stalks towards the ground underneath, where he had set a bait. As a seamstress, sewing a tapestry, would jab a needle amongst many leaves and branches of her work, to put in a tiger, so he, seeing a tiger amongst the pattern of leaves, would shoot at it. As

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far as Werner could see, the tigers never had a chance.

But: "Oh, how marvellous," exclaimed Bob. "How I'd love to go big-game hunting!"

"Well, there's no reason why you shouldn't go with me sometime," said the major.

Bob looked so pleased with this answer that the question of whether he had fished for it rose in, and was at once dismissed from, Werner's mind. At the same moment he experienced a feeling almost of love for the major. The fact that he himself would be bored by game hunting only made him the more impressed by their interest in it. The savagery, the extravagance of their fragile world acquired for him a touching innocence, towards which he felt as protectively as a lover.

But he revolted. Looking at his plate, so as to avoid meeting the surprised innocence of his eyes, he said to the major "As you've been to India, I thought I'd like to ask you about the case of a friend of mine. This young man is a magistrate in Bengal. He is now on leave and, the other day when I saw him, he told me that in his province there are a great number of political offenders. He is quite sure that many of these offenders are innocent. The police who prosecute them refuse to give him even

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an adequate amount of evidence on which to convict; but if he doesn't convict, they appeal to a higher court, and that court always gives a severer sentence than my friend would give, even supposing their victims were really guilty. So my friend is reduced to giving as mild sentences as possible, with the knowledge that he is doing an injustice. What do you think about that?"

"What queer friends you have, Werner," said Tom coldly. "I can't imagine any of the fellows we know taking your friend's point of view, on the side of the Indians against his own people."

"I don't know about this friend of yours," said the major, "but it seems to me that in my young day a fellow would either have supported the system or cleared out; or if he's convinced that there's a real injustice, let him speak out in public."

"You forget the Official Secrets Act," said Werner.

"If I may interrupt," said Lord Edward, laying down his knife and fork, and resting his hands for a moment on the polished table, "I think you should remember that India is a very large country. Of this country your friend sees at the outside an area of one hundred square miles; and those hundred miles are in Bengal, where things are notoriously bad.



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These fellows who live in countries and only see a small bit of them, are liable to get a distorted view. Now I——” he paused impressively, and there was a well-trained silence, “have travelled all over India. I don’t pretend to be specially observant, but I dare say that I have a broader point of view than your friend, simply because I have travelled over a wider area. I don’t claim anything more than a geographical breadth of view. Still, from what I saw I feel certain that *on the whole*, putting aside minor and regrettable injustices, justice is done. So, if I were you, I should regard your friend’s case as an exception.”

“In any case,” said the major, “what’s one to do about these agitators? They’re so damned clever at twisting and turning and lying, and the population’s so corrupt, that native evidence is in any case quite unreliable, so that if your friend’s law court was like an English law court, no one would ever be convicted at all. And then there’d be a revolution before the year was out. No, if we stay we stay, and the forms of justice must be adapted to that principle.”

Lord Edward laughed softly and looked round the whole table, his glance lingering a moment on Werner. Then he said *at* Werner but *to* the major and his wife: “When I meet young revolutionaries,

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family, the Government, and the new Bentley automobile, Lord Edward happened for some reason to mention that the Crown Jewels of King John had never been recovered from the Wash.

"But why don't they start digging for them?" asked Helen.

He thought a serious moment, as he always did when asked a question, and he stared, exactly as if he were hunting up the right reference in an encyclopædia engraved on his mind; then he said:

"Governments nowadays hardly set aside large sums for financial adventures. Of course, Dizzy might have done so, he was rather keen on canals," he laughed.

"Yes, I know, I know. But why can't someone start dredging on the sly?"

"*Dredging on the sly!*" Tom took it up and then they all laughed and seemed to hold her remark one of her wildest extravagances. The conversation, like a wave striking a sunny rock, exploded into a million atoms of spray, some of which formed rainbows. As though he were standing on the shore, watching that spray, Werner knew the presence of something gay, outside himself, and he felt inexpressibly happy and sad.

After supper, when they had drunk coffee, Lord

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Edward suggested to the major a game of billiards. Accordingly the two of them withdrew, with an informality which flattered their guests, for Mrs. Penn was being treated as Lady Helen's special friend, whereas Werner was again being accepted as one of the family. To emphasize this policy and design still more, as soon as the older men were gone Lady Helen plunged into an intimate topic:

"I say, Jane," she said in her jaunty, almost brusque manner, "I can't help remembering an evening many years ago when your husband—who wasn't your husband then—spent an evening with us, during which he seemed extremely nervous. But the next morning he received a telegram which made him the happiest man in the world. Curious, isn't it," she laughed straightforwardly, "that ever since then for some reason I've felt responsible for your marriage." Then, with a slight tautening of her whole handsome thinness, she wound up in her daringly social style: "Well, what do you think of marriage now?"

The heavy lady bared her teeth and rather flushed. "Well, in my own case, it's been a success on the whole. But I don't know whether Clissold would share my opinion."

"How well you put it!" Helen responded, with-

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out irony. "I'm sure that's what the majority of married people would say that on the whole they're happier than if they weren't married. I think too one can say something rather different that's also true: that on the whole unmarried people are less happy! You must remember that, you two boys!" she added, turning to Bob and Werner.

Here she seemed to draw a deep breath, and she dived into a discussion on marriage, a discussion which seemed an extraordinary parade of frankness, though what it most achieved was an effect of mystery, of knowledge, of reaching altitudes of experience unknown to the young people. When she was at her freest and highest, like a soaring hawk she still noticed the boys with her dark watchful eyes, and she added to the impression of having climbed very high by swooping down on them all with an expostulatory: "You three must be getting dreadfully bored!" Murmuring this, she stood up and, as she had done before, evoked in quite a loud voice a game. "Rummy!" she said. "Let's play rummy! Boys, get the table ready!"

They leapt to their feet, Werner joining them, delighted that he was included in the comprehensive "boys". He was so pleased indeed that he ran forward and seeing the rummy table in the corner at

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the other end of the room, he pulled it into the middle of the room. He was rather surprised that they did not assist him. He was aware, in fact, that they had held back, and he had the strong sense (as he opened and fingered the catch of the table) of Bob's overgrown, tall chortling at his back. With a little effort he found the catch, pulled out the flaps of the table and turned round. He had suddenly caught them again in one of their pauses. Lady Helen was looking at him rather vaguely as though prepared to throw a controlling glance at her sons, who were grinningly staring. As usual, they pressed forward the card of their frankness: "Couldn't you manage that little catch?" asked Tom with a certain young sweetness of real concern. Then Bob added, making a show of stifling a giggle: "Cousin Werner, really you must be stupid." Their mother, laughing, cried out that her sons must not be rude to their cousin. And reassured, patted, Werner sat down to the game.

During the game, for the first time he seriously watched the younger boy, perhaps because he was aware that Tom was also watching him. With his oval, humorous face, his dark active eyes like his mother's, and a delicacy of health which had produced no self-pity, he seemed to live in a world

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where all the dreams of his family crossed, and, at the age of sixteen had flowered in him without a blemish. The quick spontaneous intelligence of his father was in his lucid forehead which was yet unlined by the power of reflection, sexual attractiveness sprung charmingly in him, where in Bob it had already been frustrated, as his blurred eyes and his laugh, insistent to the point of impatience and hysteria, showed. In Tom's hands and smooth hair, the aristocracy and beauty of his mother seemed to have triumphed without producing any conflict.

While he thought all this, as he was playing, Werner felt the impact of their unsuitable names, Bob and Tom. The peerage had scarcely atoned for Weinberger, the surname. A detached piece of their world suddenly, like an electric sign, confronted him with its glaring stupidity.

"You should have put down the ace," said Tom. He apologized, put down the card, and smiled, noticing again Tom's concern that he should do the right thing. To please him, after this he played well, and he was lucky. Just as his luck was turning again, Lord Edward and Major Penn returned. At the end of that round they stopped playing and sat round the fire which had been lit and which struck Werner as a demonstration of what they could do in the

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way of quietly asserting luxury on a July evening. He was put next to Lord Edward.

Lord Edward's grave voice, a silver instrument, was directed at him, and said: "I am glad to hear that you care for poetry. I think I owe everything I most enjoy in life to the Greek poetry I read for Greats at Oxford. It gave me the only sense of values which I found I could always apply to my experiences, even if sometimes it was only to forget contemporary events, and realize how unimportant they were."

He paused and seemed to check himself, as if dissatisfied with what he had said. Werner noticed then that the major was looking at his uncle as though he thought him rather odd, although his glance was tinged with respect. Lord Edward opened his mouth again as if to speak, and began a word which was incomplete, and yet curiously was characterized by its German accent. Then he merely looked at Werner, with a certain lightening of his eyes, and their eyes met on this. For a few seconds they seemed alike, and German.

But when his uncle looked once more at him and actually, in his stiff clothes, turned his head, Werner became fascinated by his neck, which slightly bulged over the collar of his dress shirt. Like all statesmen

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and important officials, however thin, or even young, they may be, his uncle's neck had a slight scraggy paunch, and, when he turned, this hung forward in a little bag. Werner noticed this little paunch held out to him and for some reason he was deeply touched by the almost painful movement which had put it there; it seemed to him a greater and more signal honour than any that until now he had ever received from anyone.

### III

"Of course, Daddy will be an earl. Mummy will see to that."

Bob carried a gun and was walking ahead of Werner, who very carefully, with a self-conscious "goodness", kept behind, in order not to disturb any game that might happen to be flying or walking around. For the same reason he kept very silent, so that Bob's conversation was almost a monologue. This did not seem to upset Bob in the least.

"I suppose you realize that we're terrific snobs. You're not in the least snobbish, are you?"

"No, I suppose I'm not," Werner answered in a preoccupied voice. They were climbing a small,



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green hill, with the woods lying to their right, a small marsh (ducks, he imagined) to the far left, and some brambles scratching against the flat plate of the blue sky on the crest. Werner looked eagerly round, prepared to shout "Ware!" or "Ahoy!" at the first visible stir of fur or feather. Then he realized that a small donation to the monologue was required, so he said:

"Why is it, do you imagine, that you're snobbish?"

"Well, if I had the choice between marrying an earl's daughter and someone without a title, I'd quite definitely prefer the earl's daughter."

"Oh."

Smooth green of lawn and scrub and sky, but not the faintest flying speck or running body.

"It's amazing," said Bob, "how the animals disappear if there's a gun around. Birds are darned clever, really. They can smell the oil of a gun, you know, and then they just keep well out of sight. That is, the well-bred birds, I mean. Rooks and crows ain't clever, they're just vermin, and one only shoots them because it's a duty to do so. Vermin."

He paused and seemed to finger his gun meditatively. The tension, the instinct of the hunt grew sympathetically in Werner, until it became unbearable. He darted round, saw something, and, for-

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getting technical language, whispered "There!" Bob raised his gun to his shoulder, cocked the trigger, achieved its rigid dangerous angle with his body. There was a deafening explosion that shocked the light summer breezes.

He missed.

"Blast!"

For some reason Werner had the impression that it might be his fault that Bob had missed, though he could not tell how. This impression was strengthened by the almost vindictive tone in which Bob said:

"You know, there is something very strange about you, cousin Werner. You're not a bit like us, and yet you're our cousin."

Now he seemed entirely to abandon the chase. Holding the gun in a relaxed position, they merely seemed to stroll, whilst Bob chattered. But there seemed a note almost of anxiety in his voice when he exclaimed: "You know, I'm awfully glad I've got you alone. I've been wanting to talk to you, a great deal. Tell me, do you think there's anything strange about *us*? Don't you think that it's an awful disadvantage being half-German? I mean, having our name, and all that?"

"Why, I think it's something to be very proud of. I'm very pleased with it myself."

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"Ah, but you haven't got the name."

"I don't see why that makes so much difference. Usually people with mixed blood are supposed to have good brains."

"Oh, brains, brains! Don't you see how Mummy and us do everything we can to cover up the fact that Daddy's so beastly clever! Didn't you notice that even last night Major Penn was looking at him rather suspiciously? Of course, we admit that without his brains Daddy wouldn't have climbed so high. But still, none of the other peers are a bit bramy, really. Don't you think that there's something really fatally cold, inhuman almost, about us? All the other fellows say I'm hard—or they do sometimes. I wondered if, as you're our cousin, and so crazy, you'd see what they mean?"

"You don't strike me as at all hard," Werner said gently, "and if you're clever, I think you ought to let yourself be."

"Of course you don't have to suffer from the German name. Your mother had it. And, besides, you don't lead our kind of life," he threw in irrelevantly, and yet with a kind of bored contempt. Then he continued eagerly. "But supposing, after all our trouble, after Mother teaching us to ride so young, supposing we don't like it? I mean, suppos-

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ing all the other chaps I know, who hunt and ride and fish, get something out of it that we just don't know about and shall never know about?"

Werner was disconcerted, partly because he lacked the knowledge to answer these questions, partly also because he had an uneasy sense that Bob was asking these questions for his whole family; and, at the same time that they were rushing past him in a train de luxe. In his vision he saw them shouting at him through the windows as they roared past, while he stood there, waiting almost humbly, in the fields. His oddest impression was that they really did want to be heard by him.

He was mouthing a reply when Bob interrupted, quite rudely: "Shut up!" He raised his gun, fired, and a large bird came flapping and planing down, able only to extend one heavy wing to break the painful fall.

Bob was pleased, and ran forward with flushed cheeks, at the same time saying in a bored and deprecating voice "It's only a rook, of course."

The bird had fallen like a black rotten weighted fruit full on to the bare and bright grass. When they bent over it, the warm feathers of its neck were still faintly erect and puffed, although, perhaps, it may have already been dead. "Vermijn," said Bob, al-

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though he could not conceal his satisfaction, as he raised it a little, pulling hold of one claw. Perhaps because some life lingered in it, or perhaps through the nervous reaction of the muscles after death, it now jerked in a despairing shudder, a wave that softly sprang through the whole body. Then he held it up, and it was quite lifeless and limp, with its head loosely hanging down.

"What are you going to do with it?" Werner asked.

"Hang it up on a tree, as a warning to other vermin."

"But why?"

"They eat all the fruit, they spoil the crops, they're a pest," he said with a certain exultation.

They tied it up by the legs on to a branch and left it hanging down, a torn stenching rag of a tattered scarecrow.

For some reason, Werner felt shaken and he scarcely noticed that Bob shot a rabbit on their way home. "It will do for the servants' dinner," he said. "They will think it a treat, as I shot it."

When they reached the drive of the house they found the major and his wife seated in their car, being said good-bye to by Helen and Tom. The boys sincerely admired the Rolls Royce, which glided

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smoothly out of the drive. When it had gone, Bob puffed out his cheeks until they became very red, and walked like a bear for a few paces, in imitation of the major. They all laughed, and Helen said: "Werner will think we treat all our guests like that." Werner felt as if a medal had been pinned on to the lapel of his coat by them.

"Only a rabbit?" said Tom. "I don't call that much for a whole morning."

Bob grinned and chuckled. "It was Werner," he said. "He would talk, and when I was taking aim he would say 'There!' just to put me off. Didn't you, Werner?" he laughed.

Werner could not answer. Suddenly Bob roared with laughter and laughed so much that he nearly fell over. "You looked so funny, Werner, when I said that," he shrieked. "My God, you looked funny!" Werner felt immensely tall and out of place, like a tower, with bells clanging in his head.

## IV

"Well, all our other guests have gone," said Lady Helen. "Now we have our cousin alone, and we'll be able to bully him as much as we like. Let's go indoors."

## *The Cousins*

Since they were alone, they decided to make a field day of it. They would play tennis at once, as there was still time to get in a game before lunch.

Werner was still so dazed by his discovery that he had in some way spoiled the morning's sport for Bob, that he asked to be let off playing the first set, so as to watch how good their "form" was. So Bob and Tom played together, whilst he sat with his aunt at the edge of the court, watching the game, and occasionally throwing back a stray ball.

"I suppose you think we're awful asses!" Lady Helen began immediately. Perhaps because she could think of nothing better to say, she paused on this exclamation, so that she heard Werner reply in a trance-like voice:

"I love them, you know."

She looked at him with the same appraising measuring glance as she had when he spoke of poetry. Then she said softly "Oh, I'm awfully glad." She looked again, and added more doubtingly: "I wonder what you mean by that."

But he was watching the boys playing. Bob and Tom were giggling, as usual, playing finely and yet absurdly. "Oh, the little idiots!" their mother chuckled, and that threw her and Werner together, as though they were two gentle supervisors.

## *The Cousins*

This moment did not last. She pounced on it, rescued it from the flow of time, and rather as one of her sons might have angled a trout, presented it to her guest on a silver tray.

"Just as you like to create something in your poetry," she said, "I like to think that we've created something out of *life* for the boys in this house. You see, Edward designed that wing himself," she alluded vaguely to a large wing of the house that did not merely repeat the Elizabethan style but gathered it up and reasserted it. But there was no time to look. "They could ride before they could walk. I think the only life which is really worth living, for a man, is that of an English gentleman. You may think it stupid, but, really, the life of a gentleman is a work of art. Do you read Meredith? In his books he describes the kind of life which seems to me the only life worth living."

"Yes, but only a very few people can live this kind of life."

"Well, everyone can't be a painter or a writer. People don't have the same needs, or want to express themselves in the same way. That's where you Reds are so wrong, in imagining that they do."

"But you can be an artist without using up such



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an enormous amount of money and land which is produced by the work of other people."

"Why be afraid of money? Admittedly, Edward has to earn a lot for us to keep this place, send Robin to Eton, and so on, but the money is well spent, it goes to *make* something. I agree with you that rich greedy tasteless people are harmful, but so are they when they're poor. Yet some rich people are considerate and humane, and they even do a great deal of good with their money. Isn't it one's duty to bring up one's children so that they have standards which aren't entirely sordid? To protect them, I mean, from the world. I've deliberately prevented my sons from knowing about all sorts of ugliness, which they'll have to learn of when they're older. But when they do learn they'll be in a position to judge and criticize by high standards, they won't be saturated already by the greed and corruption which they see around them. You'll find that that's how the best men in business and politics and religion have been introduced: they are new blood coming from the outside, from English country houses, with richer gifts and understanding

"For example, I'm sure you'll think it very odd of me that I've never told the boys that they're partly Jewish. I've never told them about sex. I've done

## *The Cousins*

my best to amuse and occupy them in every possible way, so that they needn't worry about these things until they have to. I dare say that time's already come for Bob, but you can see that Tom's completely unawakened; and I'm glad of it. Of course, it's rather tiresome that they're such beastly little idiots, but I've never tried to make them read or be clever. I don't want them to get ideas into their heads about art. I don't want them to have any experience of sex until they're married, and then it will be the fullest, ripest fruit of their experience." She turned to him: "Tell me, what do you do yourself about these things? What sort of a life do you lead, sexually, for example?"

"I occasionally sleep with girls whom I know."

She was not in the slightest degree shocked or put out. Indeed, she rose quite gaily to it, crying:

"How do you mean? What girls? Prostitutes? Or just friends of yours?"

"Well, most often with friends. But I certainly would go with prostitutes, if I had no one else to go with."

She measured him with her glance again. Then she exclaimed. "Oh, how I wish I knew all about you! I would like to go on talking until I knew everything. But just tell me this. Isn't there

## The Cousins

some special girl whom you're particularly fond of?"

He flushed.

"How exciting!" she exclaimed. "I knew there must be! Do tell me, are you going to get married?"

"No."

She looked at the boys an instant, then she said: "Just tell me this: do you find that sort of promiscuity satisfactory?"

"Well     " he hesitated.

"There! There!" she triumphed. "Doesn't it take the guilt off the gingerbread? Haven't you spoilt something very beautiful? Wouldn't it be better if your life was     " She didn't quite say "like ours", but with a brilliant lifting gesture of her hand, she displayed her sense of what she had done for "the boys". "More brain, oh Lord, more brain! Have you ever read *Modern Love*? You should do so. Where the brain is wanted is not in our books, our art, our commerce, but in our lives, our happiness—then you see, with the achievement of our life we can judge the world of mere *things*, books, business, pictures, churches. I'm sure that's what Edward meant last night when he said he judged life by standards he had acquired at Oxford." She touched his arm, and he became at once a lesson, an illustration of the world which she rejected. "Money," she

## *The Cousins*

went on, "one needs money to do all this, and then one can help the poorer people."

"We're thirsty!" shouted the boys. They had finished their game and came running round to the spectators' side of the net.

"And hungry too, I expect," she said. "Well, let's go in and have lunch. Werner will be able to have a set with Tom afterwards, while Bob and I are discussing the party for next week-end."

They went in through the hall porch, which smelt of tennis balls, gun oil, clean rubber and varnish. The light shone on the double barrels of the guns, assured and holy as sunbeams slanting through a cathedral window.

The cold meal served in silver dishes was simple, so they were only waited on by one maid who left them between the courses. When people who entertain a great deal eat alone, in their big dining-rooms, they are like scene-shifters improvising a hasty meal on the stage of an empty theatre the show has not begun and the people on the stage are not acting and what the stage-hands say has not been written out for them. Conscious that they were away from their audience, Helen said with a special intimacy: "Now, tell us, Werner, how you spend your days in London."

## *The Cousins*

The one spectator—the servant—had left the room. With a special sense that there was a real pause in their activity of rushing by at top speed, and that they were listening and expecting him to speak with a private voice, Werner was nervous. He said "I used to live with my stepfather, but now, of course, I live alone. I have a bed-sitting-room in a house near Victoria. I work every morning and then again after tea between five and seven. Then, if I'm at home, I read after dinner, or listen to the wireless. I have a good many friends. I think you'd like to meet some of them. one is Ghéon, a painter, whom I think one of the best abstract painters living."

He paused, with a feeling that he had told his story badly. He was sitting with his back to the light: Bob and Tom were on the other side of the table, facing the windows looking out on to the lawn. Their faces wore, in Bob's a half-amused, in Tom's a rather strained, attention which made Werner realize that they were "indulging" him in the rare luxury of their attention. Helen sat at the end of the table listening also, with an unfamiliar quietness. They seemed to be waiting for some statement about his life. Werner said:

"I am very happy."

Their unfamiliar listening look, as though they

## *The Cousins*

played their music in a minor key, wore traces of a slight amusement now, which in Helen seemed to say with bravado "Of course you are!" as she would say to someone who was fatally ill: "Of course you're better!" Bob raised his eyebrows with an access of cynicism as if to say "Do you often tell lies?" Tom's face was blank, and Werner noticed how pale he seemed without his usual expression of gaiety.

At all events, he now realized that without his intending it, the moment had come when he openly defied them. For now he saw that since he had set foot in the house everything they had said to him had been to show him that he was not happy. He felt pressing in upon him the entire machinery of their happiness: engines with which Helen had packed every room of the house and the garages, and which even jostled each other on the lawn. As he sat there—against the light, feeling himself lost to them and with tears in his eyes—he felt the rising force of their pity strike him like a wave. For nothing could have seemed more evident to them, as he counted out the farthings of his life, his bed-sitting-room, his hours of work, his clever intellectual friends, that he was a beggar in all the palpable objects—family, sport, entertainment, cars—

## *The Cousins*

that *made* them happy. Above all, the sense of his past known to Helen, guessed at by the boys, was an abyss behind him, filled with horrors of the divorce court, the cemetery and the asylum.

What he could do was to play, for all he was worth, their game of absolute frankness. He could put all his cards on the table and show he knew as well as they what there was for him to be afraid of, and yet that he was happy.

"Of course you realize how different my childhood was from Bob and Tom's. without sport, away from the country; that explains perhaps why I'm interested in art rather than in games. Some people can even be grateful for an unhappy childhood, and can even be happier later on because they have had to grow used to a world as mad as the real world, at home. First of all, there was my mother's second marriage—after the divorce—and then the fact that that extraordinary man my stepfather took a dislike to me. I hated him. I was really unhappy for about five years after my mother's death and I took refuge from the life at home in a series of illnesses: the last illness literally almost left me paralyzed, so that after that I decided not to be ill—one can make such decisions—and I haven't been ill since. Still, I honestly think that if he hadn't gone

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mad, and mercifully been taken away, I would now be shut up." He looked up to see if he had reassured them, but they still seemed disconcerted: so, simplifying and emphasizing every contrast, he stared demonstratively round the light airy room, and said: "The rooms in our house were very dark. We were shut up. I wasn't allowed to go out of the house, not even for a walk, without my stepfather's consent. You can see then how glad I am, after all these family troubles, to be with you here and get to know you, because, until now, I have always felt shut up."

Ending on this note of appeal, he looked again at them to feel that he had really caught them out at a moment when they all hesitated and merely gaped.

"Look, there's Daddy on the lawn!" said Tom, pointing to the window.

With relief Werner turned round, and they all looked out of the windows at Lord Edward, who was strolling up and down. He walked with the self-conscious uprightness of a man who has corrected a tendency to stoop. He was wearing one of his hundred and four suits—he had two for each week of the year—which, beautifully as it fitted, clothed with a rather startling smartness not Edward



## The Cousins

himself but his general air of abstraction. Indeed, Werner noticed more than ever that everything about him denoted an infinite air of reference to institutions more or less vast. His clothes referred one to Savile Row, his moustache to his distinguished war record, his title to his wife, the lines around his mouth to the city. So, when they all looked out of the window at him, in his unseeing figure pacing up and down, not Werner but his cousins triumphed: for Werner recognized all the allusions, all the significance of this life radiating from an abstracted frowning forehead to the traffic and the top-hats of the city and outwards to an empire beyond the seas: all this Edward with beauty wore, for the sake of his sons and his wife, they had shown the treasure to Werner.

"Daddy's working like a nigger on that report," said Helen, "we mustn't disturb him." Then she turned triumphantly on Werner and said almost fiercely: "Don't you think, Werner, that even *now* the life you lead with artists in London, is unhealthy? Doesn't life consist in *doing* things just as much as in talking, writing and painting? I mean, don't your present friends—all that set—put ideas into your head which prevent you getting *outside* yourself? Now I've got it! I have a wonderful idea

## *The Cousins*

for you. You should buy a little second-hand two-seater and then a small week-end caravan. You can hitch the caravan on the back of your car and then go away from London in a jiffy, just pitching the caravan in a field and sleeping there. You'll be perfectly free, at the most you'll have to give the farm-hands a shilling tip. Some friends of mine spend all their holidays that way." With glowing eyes she stood up, and as they all left the dining-room, she said: "There's no reason why you shouldn't have a desk in the caravan too, and do your writing there. Boys, don't you envy Werner having such a free life! How I wish I were young enough to run away whenever I liked in a caravan quite by myself!"

## V

He left unexpectedly the next morning. He had scarcely slept that night, but after lying restlessly on his bed, had written for several hours at the table by the window looking out onto the moonlit lawn. Beyond the lawn he could see the tennis court and nearer him the dead-white pond where the fish jumped (there were too many fish, and Bob had talked of emptying the pond and then netting it).

## *The Cousins*

At the outskirts of the garden, encircling it, there was a low wall made of unhewn stone, the jagged edge of which burned in the milky light like a long fleece. Shadows of the trees pointed across the wet white grass in the fields beyond the garden, and on the lawn, like black pointers of a dial.

Easily he translated his mood into bad verse. When he had done so, he remembered incidents that he had not put into the poetry, the starting-off points of another poetry from a deeper centre of his being: Edward walking on the lawn, and the game of tennis, and a fish jumping when he walked round the garden with Bob; then Bob had said: "There are too many damned fishes in that pond."

They lay in their beds, suspended in moon-flaked air at various intervals above the ground. Yet how their voices, like ghosts, still filled the house! The hollow drawing-room—a coarse shell of stone and chalk and lime—had its pearl lining, which was the sense of them all spread out in their chairs or over the room, Tom with his shirt open at the neck, Bob vigorously swinging a leg thrown over the side of his chair and showing the white skin above his ankle with the sock turned down over his shoe, Helen puffing at a cigarette and talking with an eye on Edward standing at the window, deep in thought.

## *The Cousins*

“Well, if you’re fed up, just ignore us. Just walk straight out of the house, and have a look at the country; you will find that does you more good even than telling your troubles to me,” she had laughed, and, early in the morning, he had left the house, taking her advice. He walked down the short drive and out of the gate, and then up the mud road across the hill through the fields where he had gone shooting with Bob; so he had left the house and grounds, almost in a moment’s walk. It was not one of those houses that form the dominating stony centre of an immense landscape, their windows trapping the rays of the dying sun and signalling to the hills ten miles away; but one came across this house suddenly, with its high gates, small drive, and long two-storied front of yellowing stone, with to the right the stable—now the garage—clock showing below the leaves of a big chestnut tree.

It was not until he reached the tarred high road that he realized, when trudging along its straight broad line, with flat fields on either side and a village in the distance, that he would never go back. He could not discuss with them his decision not to return. To do so would be to lay bare and repeat what they already knew by heart: the reasons that divided them. With words one could only discuss

## *The Cousins*

and regret, perhaps openly quarrel with; the sight and silence and deep realization one could love, divide and respect. Such a decision was the only one they would certainly understand. Above all, he must never raise the question of whether anything had actually been spoiled by his visit.

Now the light above the walled roof of trees, their pillared trunks growing at intervals along the road, flooded the fields of long grass and corn, and filled his mind. He examined in its clarity his one deciding memory—the game of tennis with Tom.

After lunch, Tom and he had gone out to the court to play. From the moment they began playing, Werner realized that Tom was not trying: he hit back the ball with detachment, whilst all the time his eyes were on Werner. It was very like their game of rummy, for Werner too stopped trying, in order to watch his cousin. The flying ball between them—tapped all too softly—became a medium controlled by some third person: the real actors in the game were their watching eyes. As Werner watched and watched, he became more and more aware of qualities of reserve and calm in the boy which did not belong to his father, mother or brother. Ideas which gave Bob and even Helen an air of childishness were perfectly sufficient to Tom,

## *The Cousins*

giving him indeed an air of sweet maturity, wherever, enclosed in the womb of summer and of wealth, he played. At the end of their third set (which Werner had won), Tom said. "You know, you play awfully badly."

"Well, at all events I've won!" laughed Werner, amused by the gravity with which he had spoken.

"You play even worse when you win than when you lose. You know, games aren't just a matter of winning or losing. Don't you realize that? Everyone does. It's a question of style. You don't know how to hold your racket."

"Well, teach me, then," said Werner, suddenly affected by Tom's inexplicable sadness. Tom smiled anxiously and told Werner how to hold the racket correctly. Now Werner could not hit the ball at all. Suddenly Tom lowered his racket (without, of course, letting it touch the ground), not petulantly but with an expression of pain; then he shook his head: "It's no use, I can't teach you. You must have a coach. Let's go indoors and mend my wireless."

They walked side by side across the lawn, Werner feeling all the while that Tom was in some way deeply hurt, to the point of disillusion even. On

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their way, Tom said: "You know, you've upset us all most awfully, Bob in particular."

"But why ?" Werner's heart sank, and he felt convinced that he had made some irremediable blunder. "I thought we were getting on so well together," he said.

"Oh, yes, we like you. That's just it. If we didn't, it wouldn't matter, would it?" said Tom with fond candour. Then he went on in the same anxious voice: "Is it true that you live in a bed-sitting-room? Or are all those things you told us at lunch just lies?"

Werner burst out laughing. "Of course I live in a bed-sitting-room! But there's nothing terrible in that."

The worried look did not leave Tom's face. "Do you really know all those artists and writers whom you swank about?"

"Yes. Some of them are very brilliant."

"Brilliant! What a funny thing to say! Aren't they awful rotters?"

"No, they're the best friends I have," he answered.

They were now in a corner of the drawing-room reserved for Tom's wireless. "Hold this wire down," he said, "while I solder it. Take care not to burn your fingers. Are you honestly a Socialist and all that?"

## *The Cousins*

"Yes."

"Then don't you believe in God?"

"No."

"And do you think a charwoman, for instance, equal, well, it's rather embarrassing to say, but I mean equal to *us*?"

They discussed Socialism vaguely for a while. Yet there was something else at the back of Tom's mind. He said: "You know, you played that game awfully oddly!"

"What game do you mean?"

"Why, when we were playing rummy the other night. And you couldn't manage the catch of the table when you ran forward to open it. In any case, it was our job to open it: you are a guest. There must be something wrong with a person who can't manage a simple little thing like that. Is it true that your stepfather was mad?"

"He has been in a home for some years."

"I say, you don't mind my talking like this, do you? Well, it wouldn't affect you, of course, his being mad, because he isn't a blood relative. But isn't your family very odd as well? Mummy, of course, warned us about you, but she didn't tell us everything."

"My dear Tom," said Werner, "I'm not mad."



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He made an absurd attempt to explain why he was not, to which Tom listened gravely. He ended up by saying: "You know, Tom, I'm quite grateful that my stepfather was so crazy, because living in a home like mine taught me to accept the world as it is. For my home I had the real world, which is rather mad."

"Now that's a mad thing to say," said Tom, seriously watching him. "What can you mean by it?"

Suddenly Werner felt angry with them all, with the house itself, and raising his voice he said: "I will try and show you what I mean. Supposing, then, we were living—all of us in this house—not in a July of the 1930's but in July 1914, and that you were two years older than you are now, and that Bob was as old as he now is. You see, then, that in a month's time, while you were still thinking about games and imagining that anyone who was not exactly like yourselves was fit only for the asylum, while you were nestling in the world composed of the summer, Eton, this old house, you would be simply pitchforked into the war like so much hay standing in those fields and soon to be cut down. Of course, you would go as bravely and uncomplainingly as the horses—your own hunters—that would also be sent out, and you would remain as well-bred

## *The Cousins*

and innocent as you now are, to the moment of your death. You would imagine even that you had gone of *your own free will* to beat the Huns, whereas in reality you would not have decided anything at all; you would have been sent out like the horses or, as I say, pitchforked like the hay. Believe me, that you would no more *decide* anything than you would ever *think*: thought and will-power are to you—all of you—like tonsils or the appendix—useless parts of the organism to be extracted the moment they show the least signs of irritation. So you would fight and be killed, and whatever you did, one would love you: yes, I for my part would go on loving you to the end of my life, whatever happened. But nevertheless you would not entirely escape responsibility, you would be responsible, firstly, for throwing away your own lives, and secondly, for the Germans whom you happened to kill. Perhaps you'll say that it is the people who are at the top and organize a war who are the real murderers; but as one can never find out who these people are, I think it's simpler and preferable to say that the people who are really responsible for the worst crimes in society are those who indulge in them quite wantonly, without thinking, as irresponsibly as if they were trying on a new suit of clothes. There are very

## *The Cousins*

few deliberate murderers in our society: yet a great part of that society is made up of involuntary murderers: people who commit atrocious crimes in their sleep. You will say that since there is no war on at present, you don't see what I'm talking about. All I am trying to say is that twenty years after the war the question of responsibility is even acuter. You may refuse to listen to me, you may genuinely not understand, but you've got, for your own sake, from this moment, to try to understand, because sooner or later a crisis is bound to arise in which you will have to take sides: so all I tell you at present is that you mustn't go, like Bob, into an armaments firm, nor like your father into a bank. You must remember me and remember that I'm not mad."

He no longer awaited a reply from Tom; his voice echoed in the hollow room and spoke to the whole house. It explored corridors that seemed to be corridors also of his own mind, and in a frightening moment he felt so isolated that he might indeed have been mad. With both hands he had given Tom the evidence to show that he should be avoided. But no, he was not alone, for they had all come back into the room. Bob and his mother came in smiling arm in arm, and Tom ran across the room and em-

## *The Cousins*

braced Helen, seeming almost to leap into her arms. When he had kissed her several times, still with his arm round her waist, where it met Bob's, with a special understanding he turned round and looked at Werner. His pale face, a few inches below the two smiling faces which seemed to grow on the same stalk above him, gave Bob a quick glance—triumphant and vindictive—that vigorously excluded him. Then they all came forward, surrounded him and went in to tea.

Werner walked along the road until he reached a small town where there was a main line station. From here he took a ticket to London and sent a telegram to Helen, asking her to forward his suitcase. As he sat back in the railway carriage he tried to forget, and succeeded only in re-creating, a most curious impression of his walk along the last mile of the road: that his cousins (now, while the train tore him away from them, they were coming down to breakfast, greeting the morning and each other) were ghosts, and that their voices, which obsessed his brain, were voices in an inescapable dream. When he at last destroyed this vision, it was succeeded by one still more disturbing: that he himself, who stalked along the morning road, tall under the tall trees, who was now carried rapidly in a glass,

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wooden and iron machine rolling over metal lines through the landscape towards the town, that he was a ghost. "Our impact", he thought, "is ghostly Which of us exists, and which is dead?"

# THE BURNING CACTUS

# THE BURNING CACTUS

## I

In the cactus field high up above the town one hears that faint roaring which steams always from a great city; on a fine day in the late summer of the South it has another sharper and yet droning prolonged note, like the far-off rotation of a dynamo

Blue. The southern port lies beneath the field, scarred with docks and roads and fringed above by the excited suburbs of houses with Moorish towers, glass domes and chiselled terraces, with lemons and yellow-green fig trees vigorous in the strongly scented gardens. Beyond the markings of ships, cranes and docks in the port, the sea, with waves like wires, is immense and, as the sun westers, becomes blank in the dazzle of sky and horizon. On the grassy path slightly shaded by a wall at the edge of the cactus field, on one such afternoon a young man lay. Above him was the mountain-side

## *The Burning Cactus*

scattered with a few small newly built flat-roofed houses, and older houses of very rich people. On the mountain-crest he saw a church, a restaurant and a model aeroplane from which people, while drinking tea and swinging round in a wide circumference above the hill, might see the view. Above this shape of a giant insect chained by one leg and circling over the landscape, was the intolerable sky.

The young man wore no jacket over his light grey shirt, nearly matched by the darker grey of his flannel trousers. His open collar revealed a graceful eager neck he had a fair but not unblemished complexion, long fair hair, good features, large eyes and sensitive nostrils. The refinedness of his features was purely external: small spots on the skin, a rubbed redness of the neck, a looseness of the lips, the overarched nostrils, and slightly bloodshot eyes showed places where the surface seemed already tarnished by something altogether coarser and more violent which threatened in time to alter the whole face. His hands were shapely and yet tactile, in contrast to his heavy lips. One hand was now pressed to his head, whilst the other clutched at his thigh with coarse exhibitionism, giving his whole body an expression of excluding mountain,



## *The Burning Cactus*

port, sea and sky, while pointing singly to the speaker's own personality.

"I hate it! I hate it! Why did I come here to be tortured by this man and his household? What does Bauer want from me? What good can it do him that I should suffer? Why did he ever take me away from Berlin, where I had good work and was happy? I tell you, Roger and Pearl, he came into the hotel in Berlin where I was working. He sat down in the lounge and ordered a cocktail, and when I brought it to him he deliberately smiled at me. He didn't say one word, but he must have learnt who I was from the head waiter. A few days later, the head waiter told me that the man from Number 14, Herr Dr. Bauer, offered me a job to look after his flat in Barcelona, if I would come here at once. It was December then—only to think of it, over six months ago—it was bitterly cold in Berlin, I hated the work in the hotel, and my brother and sister-in-law were exhausting me dreadfully. I love them, I love them very truly, but they can be worse than difficult sometimes. So I wired that I would leave for Barcelona the next morning. How should I know that Bauer would treat me like this? I thought that he must have particularly liked me and would be kinder and more personal than the management

## *The Burning Cactus*

of a hotel. I ask you, what harm have I ever done to him? Why should he drag someone whom he had only seen once in the hall of an hotel right across Europe, in order to torture him?"

"My poor child," said Pearl, stroking his hair. "You ought not to think about it so much, you ought to let your brain rest sometimes. Poor Till."

"It's no use trying to comfort me. It's no use, I tell you; something's broken in me. All those years in Germany after the war, and having to earn a living for my whole family—one would have thought that was bad enough, and then this happens on top of it all. . . . If it wasn't for you and Roger, I should be mad by now; yes, I should be mad, really. . . .

"I hate it all," he continued, looking vindictively down at Barcelona, "I hate Barcelona, I hate Meyer, I hate the Spanish, I hate the endless hot weather. . . . Give me a cigarette."

"Another?"

"Yes, that exactly shows the state I am in. It is interesting to see that I can't leave off smoking. I don't know why it is, but I must *taste* something all the time. It's no use trying to stop myself. I'm quite powerless."

He took the cigarette passionately, and then

## *The Burning Cactus*

paused with the match burning in the sunlight whose brilliance withered the flame at the creepingly charred stump. Then he fixed his attention on a little prickly cactus growing near the path and removed some inches from the cactuses in the field.

"The life I lead here is like that cactus. It's dry and bitter and cutting. Stupid, useless thing, why does it grow here? Listen, Pearl—and Roger, you too—everything I hate I see in this moment concentrated in that cactus."

With a gesture, playful yet entirely devoid of humour, he set the match to one of the cactus leaves. He watched the leaf burn secretly and intensely with a little hiss until the fire spread to the rest of the plant; then they all three became aware of a wind blowing from the side of the mountain down into the hot valley. For suddenly a branch of fire sprang along the grass from the isolated plant to a further plant that belonged to the whole field.

Till sprang up and tried to pull the second cactus away from the rest with his hand. But even as he did so a rivulet of flame was blown straight across the breadth of the field; and this rivulet had others.

"It's no use, Till," said Pearl in a strained voice. "We must come away. The only thing is to run."

"Run?" exclaimed Till indignantly.

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Roger spoke for the first time:

"Come away, you blasted little fool," he said, "or you'll be getting us all sent to prison."

He pulled him away from the cactus. For a moment Till buried his face in his hands and gave a sob. Then he ran with the others along the side of the field and down the hill.

As they ran down the baked bare path away from the field, they passed an old man with a stick, who stared to see three such remarkable looking people running in the heat. Till with his beautiful, desperate expression, Pearl with her heavily painted face and dyed hair uncovered, Roger with a constricted white face and wearing plus-fours and a beret. Behind them the fire now spread over the whole field. In the huge sun, the tongues of flame did not rise in rich colours threatening the sky, but under the glare the small frenzied fire spread a transparent inundation which clutched at the ground and ran to devour new fuel. Above this lake of fire a wavering sheet of film distorted yet hardened everything seen through it. Above that film were thin black smoke and wandering lifted smuts and fragments.

Without looking back, the three foreigners ran

## *The Burning Cactus*

down the hateful path past the flat-roofed suburban houses. They came to a main road and took a taxi; Pearl ordered the driver to drive to her house. She sat back and sighed:

"My God, I'm glad that's over."

"It's not over," said Roger sharply. "Someone saw us."

Till did not speak. He sat opposite his two companions in the taxi, with his chin pressed against his hand, whilst he stared away from them, out of the window. They passed through long loud streets where the people were occupied with their lounging and did not know about the fire on the hill. When the taxi stopped Pearl and Roger got out. Till looked round and said: "Tell him to drive on to Bauer's."

"Shall we expect you to come round this evening?" Pearl asked. Till did not reply.

When the taxi had disappeared, Roger said:

"By God, I wish we had never met Till."

"But, dear, can't you see that it's not his fault?"

"It isn't the fire I object to so much, Pearl, it's his damned impertinence. Never one word of apology, nothing. On the contrary, he seemed offended, as though not he himself, but we, had set the field on fire, just in order to annoy him."

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"Yes, I know, I know. But that's all a part of his illness. We can't measure his suffering. It's too great for us."

"Well, there are limits to what we can put up with."

"I know there are. But I like him."

Meanwhile Till had moved to the more comfortable seat in the taxi and there he half-lay in a state of unthinking hopelessness. "I, I, I, I," he thought, but without formulating any sentences or seeing anything except the white mineral intensity of that twisting sheet of flame. He rapped the glass of the window violently, for the driver, with typical Spanish lack of consideration for one's feelings ("*they're like natives, like natives*") was going too far. The taxi stopped. Till counted out some money, pushed it into the man's hand and swept away without troubling to rebuke the man or to wait for him to say "Good day, thank you", or to swear because the tip was small.

## II

Bauer's flat was in the largest and most modern block of flats in Barcelona. It was built in the new

## *The Burning Cactus*

German style with a glass shaft down the whole side of the house to light the staircase and the lift. Being the top flat of all, it had a roof garden for sun-bathing. The flat was built in two stories round a central hall. Till had a small clean room with metal walls, rather like the cabin of a liner. this room was on the lower floor. When he first lived there he had a view of the mountain-side from his window, but now his room was already darkened by a new building which had been put up in front of it.

When he had shut and locked the door of his room he uttered a loud sigh and flung himself on to the bed. "Oh, God, again! Again!" he exclaimed, laying his hands on his stomach. Then he turned over on his side and drew his knees up to his chin. He had a tearing pain in his stomach and his chest over his heart ached with a tired unrelenting pain that seemed a comment on his consciousness of continual unhappiness. He shut his eyes and in that moment wished intensely to die, not on account of the pain in his stomach but to escape from the tired feeling of his heart. He lay thus for some seconds, which seemed so long a time that he realized that by attempting to rest he could escape from nothing and only make time seem longer. He rolled his head

## *The Burning Cactus*

round and looked at the clock, catching a pleasing glimpse of his face in the glass, with the satiny hair in rich disorder. It was already twenty to six. Bauer was going out to-night and he wanted a light supper very early. As he thought this, Till heard footsteps pass his door; he knew at once it was the young Swede, known as Conrad, who was Bauer's secretary. He clenched his fist and jaw, and his whole body grew rigid with hate.

When he heard a door slam and the footsteps disappear, he got up, brushed his hair, examined his face closely in the glass and looked at the picture of his mother which stood framed on the table by his bed. Except that she had dark hair, her features were exactly like those of her son, moreover, she sat with one arm resting on her knee so as to support her face, which tensely stared out of the picture, with her hand, while the other hand clutched at her elbow, in exactly the attitude which was most typical of Till. He then went upstairs to the kitchen. From the peg on the kitchen door he took down the long jacket of white canvas in which he worked. Wearing this, he looked pliant, hygienic, as modern and shamly aristocratic as a photograph in an advertisement for a vacuum cleaner. He made the mayonnaise, and with the delicacy of extreme



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loathing, poured it over some cold fish and sliced pieces of cold hard-boiled egg.

The violent gentleness with which he worked betrayed his anxiety about the fire. Supposing it ran further down the field, leaping over the wall, and caught the next field and so set light to the orchards on the mountain-side? It might easily set fire to a house, or it might be blown along the side of the hill and then set fire to the convent. There was sure to be news about it in the papers and when the old man who had seen them running away read his evening paper he would report them to the police. Of course there would be no chance of his not recognizing them.

Damn Pearl! Damn Roger! Why had they insisted on going there this afternoon? If he had been alone he would not have lost his head, he would have climbed *up* the hill and then crept away unobserved. As a matter of fact, if he had been alone, he would not have gone out at all this afternoon but would have drunk coffee at the Royal; and then the particular combination of circumstances which had led to the fire would never have occurred on another day. (*Or would they?* he lightly wondered.) Why must Roger wear that eternal beret, why did Pearl never wear her hat, why must she dye her hair

## *The Burning Cactus*

and paint her lips that colour? Of course, simply in order to draw attention to themselves, and this time like hell they had succeeded. He would get into trouble simply on their account.

He laid the dining-room table and at half-past six he went into the simply furnished but comfortable hall where Bauer, his guest, and the Swedish boy, Conrad, were drinking sherry. He told Bauer that supper was served. He bowed slightly as he quietly said this and spoke exclusively to Bauer. He did not even glance at Conrad. Then he withdrew and walked up the back stairs through the hall to the dining-room. As soon as he heard them take their seats, he went into the dining-room to serve the meal. As he took the plates round he never once looked at Conrad, but all the time he was aware of him; he imagined his brown curly head leaning forward over the food as he concentrated with a frown on what he was eating, and at the same time, with knife raised, with forced but amused attention followed Bauer's conversation.

Bauer lowered his whole standard of conversation, even when Conrad was not there, to Conrad's level but even then Conrad understood it very little. To Till there was something irritating in Conrad's serious attempts to be amused. Still more was he

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exasperated by Bauer's deliberate, imposed stupidity, for by instinct he realized that Bauer belonged to the class of intellectual snobs. Bauer's social life was lived in the company of his French pictures, English novels, German books of philosophy and Japanese pornographic engravings. Till understood that he really appreciated these things, and that the monocle, the endless obscene jokes, the long morning hours in bed, the extreme cold politeness, the sun-bathing, the vigour that preserved his appearance as if to the command of a whip, so that although he was a man of fifty there was not the least sign of muscular collapse in his whole body, were all a performance; they were a wall which at some time in his life Bauer had built round himself. It had never changed.

As the meal went on, Till's white and mannered contempt for Conrad spread to Bauer himself. He heard the guest, who was a young German new to Barcelona, attempt to show his appreciation of Bauer's pictures by discussing an exhibition which he had recently seen in Paris. Being also interested in philosophy, he remarked on Bauer's library. Bauer ignored all his remarks about art and philosophy, so that, in despair, the guest complained of the weather.

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"It is terribly hot here, to-day, isn't it?"

"Hot? Hot?" repeated Bauer, and then with the expression of someone who makes a private joke, he turned to Conrad. "Are you hot (*bist Du warm*) this evening, my dear Conrad?"

This silliness had a nervous effect on Till, rather like the pain from his stomach which also ringed his chest and heart. Every remark the young German made Bauer seemed to take up, examine, discover a double meaning in, and present with polite bantering obscenity to Conrad. Serving at table Till listened to this machinery of glinting knives and forks and Bauer's imbecile conversation. Bauer seemed sardonically to be withholding the life in himself from the world. At the same time Till sometimes felt that Bauer's behaviour was peculiarly directed at himself. For the cold smile filled him with a despairing conviction that he had in some sense profoundly failed Bauer.

Because he was fenced in with hatred for his two companions as also by the visionary memory of the fire, Till had scarcely noticed the German guest. But as he served the sweet he felt the stranger watching him; then he saw his eyes reflected in the glass of a dark picture. Conrad and Bauer were squabbling and the stranger sat there silent and for-

## *The Burning Cactus*

gotten. In that moment of his host's complete and puerile preoccupation the young man did not merely glance at Till but his eyes, reflected in the glass, seemed to understand him. A smile of almost religious ecstasy lit Till's face as he raised his head so that his features were illuminated in the glass beside the stranger's eyes. Till trembled, until his delay seemed perceptible, then he returned to the table to serve the course. When he served Bauer, Bauer looked up and meeting his eyes for a moment, said, "You have done us well to-night." Then he turned to his guest and added with a smile. "I am very lucky to have someone as good as Till to look after me."

In Till's brain the printed letters of this short sentence assumed giant proportions. They became the cruellest thing Bauer had ever said to him. He had let his guest know he was their servant. Till angrily dismissed the newcomer from his thoughts, and again began to worry about the fire

After supper he lay down until he was sure the others had left the house. Five minutes later he himself went out, called a taxi, and directed the driver to the end of that road nearest the cactus field. He had dressed himself for the evening with Roger and Pearl. He wore a double-breasted jacket of grey

## *The Burning Cactus*

flannel with a silk handkerchief in the breast pocket, and a gold chain hung from his wrist. He was very agitated and he sat forward in the taxi, looking out from side to side.

Barcelona showed political signs that Spain is now taking its place in the truer, commercial sun; the late light streets were full of crowds; policemen with rifles, and smaller excited groups of people, occasionally held up Till's taxi. He saw in an exasperated vision the complete unimportance of these disputes, and it provoked him that they interrupted his movement. When one reflected on the chaos of political life in his own country, these people seemed like enthusiastic children tasting cigarettes and wine for the first time. He realized the uselessness of every experience except explosive individual feelings, which shot one like an aimless but hot rocket across an expanse of waste in which the sun was cooling and the world running down and corruption like a moss infringing on the edges of reality.

At last the taxi stopped. He jumped out and ran up the track, now cool and seeming wet with dusk.

He reached the cactus field, and there was not the faintest sign of any disturbance to the colourless dusk that lay large along the side of the hill waiting for the night to relieve it with transparent coloured

## *The Burning Cactus*

depths and brilliant stars. The landscape was bald mud and grass, occasionally marked with peaty clumps of trees and cactus, or the straight lines of buildings where the first lights mildly shone. For one feverish moment of heavenly reality he sincerely thought that the fire was only a dream which had never taken place. He drew closer and with ghostly hand touched the ground, as he leaned over the single plant that was divided from the rest of the field. Then, with a sick feeling he saw that it was charred and he apprehended the irrevocable truth of something that had already happened for four hours and would not cease to have happened. He turned, nailed as it were to the event, and walked slowly away from the field. But when he had left the field relief flooded over him, for he saw now that in a sense nothing really had happened. that is to say, nothing that mattered or could have serious consequences. With a sense of joy he ordered the taximan to drive to the house where Pearl and Roger lived.

### III

“The fire is over; there is nothing, my dear, nothing.”

## *The Burning Cactus*

When Till was in his very good mood he would speak English.

"Nothing? What do you mean? How do you know?" asked Roger.

"My dear little Roger, because I have just been there. I have been working at Meyer's and then when I was finished I have taken an auto and I have seen that now there is no fire. It is no more."

"Thank God, thank God!" exclaimed Pearl. "Oh, my God. I have been so worried! What an afternoon, my God!"

"Yes, what an afternoon, I could have wrung your neck, Till You have no idea how upset Pearl has been."

"You would have wrung my neck, my little Roger? Oh, no, I will not believe it. Have you been 'to Hamburg' this afternoon, then?"

"You should not talk like that in front of me. I am shocked," said Pearl, grinning.

"We don't compete on Thursdays," said Roger. "The young American lady has made friends with a leader of the Catalan Parliament, and every Thursday they go 'to Hamburg' together in the next room all the afternoon Pearl and I can't bear to compete."

The room was dingy, a large bed took up half of



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it. As they talked they sat and leaned on this bed. Over the bed, by the door, was an electric light switch which was painted exactly the colour of Pearl's lips. The wallpaper was arsenic green.

"Are you hungry?" asked Pearl.

"Oh, yes, I am very hungry. I have eaten nothing; nothing since before the fire."

"I will make tea," said Roger, getting up.

When they were alone, Pearl said: "There's plenty of room now," and she lay on the bed. Till sighed and did so too.

Pearl touched his hand and said: "You know, it's nice to see you happy for a change."

"*Happy?*"

"Yes, you are happy now just for a minute or two, aren't you?"

"Pearl, please don't think I'm the sort of person who's always unhappy," he said in his complaining voice "On the contrary, I'm usually too gay, too light-hearted, too irresponsible, if anything."

"It's nicer to see you when you are happy. You seem able to get outside yourself more. When you're unhappy you look quite a different person. It's a funny thing to say perhaps, but sometimes you look like a primitive savage, or a hunted animal. Your eyes gleam and your voice seems to groan as

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if it were trapped somewhere at the back of your head."

"I tell you, I'd always be happy if it weren't for this man. Why does he torture me like this, what does he want from me? What good does my suffering do him, I should like to know? But he's not the worst even. After all he's an inferior person who is not even worth bothering about now—he has passed that. Yes, a person of education, taste, talent, who has definitely chosen the company of people who are in every way beneath him. He's done for—he's destroyed himself already, but the person I really hate is his secretary, Conrad. I can give you no idea what a low, cruel, depraved creature he is. He is not human at all and he detests me. I hate him too. I know now what it really is to hate, for the first time. This evening when I was serving at dinner Conrad forced Bauer to lower himself even to the depth of his showing me in front of a guest that I was their servant. Bauer said: 'What a good meal Till has made for us this evening'; then he said to the guest: 'I do not know how we could manage in Barcelona without a *cook* like Till'; then they both smiled. It was terrible, Pearl, terrible. That is the lowest point I have ever reached. And all the time I was in agony about the fire."

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"But, my dear Till, you have *us*, and we understand you."

"Yes, yes, but if you knew how I hate being their servant. I left Berlin in order that I might escape from that, and now, here, it is far worse. It is degrading to be a servant, and if one is one, one becomes degraded. I am really degraded. Something is broken in me. It's as though all those crowds of people in the square here, and in Berlin, and in the hotels where I have waited, had slimed across me, leaving their tracks like snails. Don't contradict me, I can't bear you to comfort me. I'll tell you a story which will make you see how true what I say is.

"When I was in the hotel in Berlin there was a nice young waiter who served the tables next to mine and who was very fond of me. When I was new, he used to help me and he saved me from getting my hands badly burnt by touching the dishes which had just left the ovens and which were left on a special table. Usually they used to let the new waiters get quite seriously burnt, as a joke. Well, on Saturday evenings I used to go sometimes to a dance *lokal* to meet social friends of mine who knew me, not as a waiter but as a young man interested in art and who used to read Rilke. You wouldn't meet a waiter reading Rilke, would you? One evening I

## *The Burning Cactus*

was at a table talking to my literary friends when this waiter came up to me and shook my hand. Before I realized what I was doing I had stared at him and said 'Who are you?' He laughed, thinking I was joking. Then I said, very loud: 'I don't know you. You are only a waiter.' I tell you when I had said this I realized that I must be corrupt. I'm half-educated, that's another thing. I haven't got the energy to educate myself into the intelligentsia, and I'm too well educated just to be a servant, or a waiter."

Pearl was silent.

"If ever anything happens to me, Pearl, if I die suddenly, if I kill myself, or do something violent to someone, you will understand why I have done it. I want you to know. You see, I live entirely from my feelings, and I must do what they tell me to do."

"But think, Till, there is a lot of good in your life. You work, and in addition to that you support your mother and your sister-in-law."

"It's no use, Pearl, it's no use. I tell you, I only support them because in that way I can make myself the very centre of their lives, so that they revolve round me. They depend completely on me, and so they *are* me, and on that condition I support them. My industry is my one virtue, the virtue of my

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bourgeois upbringing. But what's the use of the work I do? Where does it lead? All my life I must remain their servant or the servant of people like them. Would you want even to exist if you were in my position?"

Pearl did not answer. She smoothed his hair with her hand and kissed his lips. He suffered her to kiss him silently and when she took her mouth away he did not even move. His face wore a hard disdainful expression.

"I thought you would understand that what I was saying just now had nothing to do with my erotic life. I don't seem to have conveyed it to you that I was serious."

Pearl laughed.

"What a funny, silly child you are, Till, in spite of all your experience. How can I show my wish to help you, better than by showing that I love you?"

"Thank you! Thank you!" he exclaimed, with passionate vehemence. "I have been loved by people ever since I was fifteen. By better people than you, Pearl, too." He jumped up and stood by the window. "And what good has it done me?"

Without listening for any answer she might make he leaned out of the window. His sense seemed to travel across roofs of houses up the

## *The Burning Cactus*

sparsely lit mountain-side to where the unsmouldering cactus field lay with white reflecting broken leaves and stalks under the brilliant late summer sky. He stood back into the room and, still looking out of the window, he said quietly:

"In any case I have nearly lost the charm which made so many people love me. You can't deceive me about that, however hard you try."

Just then Roger came back into the room with the tea.

"What a long time you have been, my dear Roger," said Till, a little impatiently but in English.

"Well, I've had to spread paste on all these sandwiches. If you weren't such a darned slacker you'd have helped me, Till."

He looked at them, holding the tray in his hands. "Why, what's the matter, Pearl?" he continued. "You look quite white and upset."

"No, no," said Pearl, touching her head with her hand, "I have a headache, that is all. Till has been telling me about that beast Bauer."

"Is she really all right, Till?"

"Yes, she is quite all right. She suffers a little from this terrible heat. That is all there is wrong with you, I think, Pearl?"

## *The Burning Cactus*

Pearl agreed, nodding her head.

That evening when Till was gone, Roger said.

"Look here, Pearl, we can't invite Till out again. I am exceedingly sorry for him but don't you see how he upsets both our lives? And it doesn't do any good either, because we don't succeed in helping him. He gives me such a sense of chaos, of aimlessness, of hysteria in everything."

"At all events," she answered, "there is one thing in him which we can keep hold of. That is his terrible physical pain which is too great for us to understand."

"I know, I know, and I am sorry for him. But we can't let this disorganize our lives as well as his own."

"It's something that's been going on ever since the beginning of the war. You're quite right. The causes lie too deep for us or for anyone else to help him now. We shall have to stop seeing him. I am very sorry. Kiss your little girlie, Roger."

## IV

His shirts and silk artistic ties, his seven suits, his thick jersey of pure wool to take care of him when

## *The Burning Cactus*

he was cold, his electric flannel heater to lay on his stomach, his powder, his lipstick, his gold chain, his scents, his hair-oil, his hand looking-glass and magnifying looking-glass; his letters from Pierre saying that he would shoot himself; from Hans saying that he only lived for his dog; from Erich saying "Dear Till, come at once to Basel"; "Dear Till, whatever else happens remember we always have what we said on the pier at Sellin, there is always the steamer going down the Rhine from Bingen to Boppard", letters from his mother enclosing fragments from the story of her life, "Forgive me for marrying him, I was happy between the ages of seventeen and twenty-three"; letters from his sister-in-law, "Darling Tillyho, you have done everything for us, we have broken the china vase in the studio"; twenty letters from Till to Hans, from Till to Erich, from Till to the Finnish consul in Bremen, from Till to Christopher, from Till to Pierre, explaining everything so clearly that finally he kept them; he did not post them; he wanted to read them himself

On the table by his bed his clock and the photograph of his mother.

Behind this was pasted one of his father, a Prussian officer with severe frowning lean assertive snub face and wearing a uniform and Iron Cross and a



## *The Burning Cactus*

sword. There was no traceable resemblance to Till in this photograph.

To delete every vestige of one parent from one's face is, in its way, as remarkable a feat of the human will as the building of the Panama Canal.

He rested. He was not unhappy. On the contrary he rested with the satisfaction of a great performer resting after a sublime performance. He lay staring up at the ceiling. The light hit his face, which was lined but expressionless as a sheet of paper with only lines drawn on it. He rose, lit a cigarette. He lay down again with the cigarette in his hand and his eyes wandering.

He got up and put a record on the gramophone. He lit another cigarette, angry with it. The record finished. The needle ticked against the end:

*I, I, I, I, I. . . .*

He stopped the gramophone. He lay on his bed. The tune went on playing in his head:

*I live in the centre of wonder like a planet  
I have sex appeal to which you all must yield  
My body burns soft like candle light  
The surface attracts like a magnetic field.*

## *The Burning Cactus*

He lit a cigarette. He lit another cigarette (angrily).  
He put another record on. It ticked at the end:

*I, I, I, I, I . . .*

He stopped the gramophone. He lay on his bed.  
The tune went on playing:

*When I am alone a certain rhythm fails  
Which dragged me on wheels through traffic and  
down lanes  
Or made me dance with a dance tune's emotion  
I am like a patient wanting medicine  
The outside movements were my nurse that brings  
A glass, a light plays on her face  
Her newspaper my thoughts, her lullabies  
My peace, but when she goes  
The impulse stops, the music is so still  
The wall so motionless, it is a kind of movement  
That drags me back and back against my will  
I watch a flower that mocks and visibly grows  
My mind is empty like a mirror  
Which rays explore with endless searching terror  
I am aware of Error.*

His eyes range the room, resting on nothing. His  
lips are dry. It is unbearable to be alone.

Suddenly, with the malicious avarice of an animal, his eyes stare and then focus on his writing

## *The Burning Cactus*

desk. . . . He noticed that one drawer was not properly shut. He jumped up from his bed and pulled it right open. Then he saw that the papers had been disturbed and were not in their right order. . . . He hurriedly threw them all out on the floor and examined them. . . . He found that a corner on which the address had been written was torn away from one letter. It was the address of an elderly female relative who lived in Berlin and of whom he had spoken with Conrad in the days when they were on good terms. . . . Conrad and Bauer had not yet returned from their party, so Till quickly opened the door and ran along the passage past the lobby to Conrad's room.

When he came to the door he paused, with his hand pressed against the frame. He dared not go in. For with an overwhelming conviction, he knew that Conrad and Bauer were there that in some outrageous way which totally excluded him, they were *together*. The conviction remained although he remembered that they had gone out; since they were out, he could open the door and with malice disturb their ghosts.

In the drawer of the table by Conrad's bed he found the piece of the letter which Conrad had torn away. Till had not the least doubt that Conrad

## *The Burning Cactus*

intended to write to his relative in order in some way to blackmail her, or at least to make mischief between her and himself . . . She was his only relative with money. He returned to his room and quickly undressed and flung himself into bed. . . . He read through his relative's letter and it seemed pathetic that the old lady should become estranged from him. . . . He wept. His eyes shone with anger mingled with a strange triumph.

Then, at the very crisis of his emotion he suddenly felt the old defeatist, unrelenting pain form like a phenomenon of the weather, around his stomach and his heart. He turned over and drew up his knees to his chest. As he did so he saw the cactus field blaze before his eyes. He groaned, and with closed hands he pressed the letter against his mouth as though to feed the tireless flames that consumed and shall consume him endlessly.

## TWO DEATHS

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## TWO DEATHS

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Every day I would visit the sanatorium, little as I like that part of Vienna, which is built all of hospitals, shops gleaming with medical instruments, and the massive stone criminal law courts. Here the stream of the town no longer flows with the cheap, ruined smartness of the opera district, nor with the oppressive poverty of the tenements: it tinkles to the running bells of the smooth cream-enamelled and chromium ambulances; in the spring of 1934 the streets were often shuttered with the darkness of the police vans carrying political offenders to their trial.

Even the air seems medicated, it smells so of disinfectant, and just as in some French towns the houses seem always gay with flags, so here the storied peeling stucco blocks seem swathed in bandages. Nurses, students, patients and doctors carrying leather bags, hurry along.

When we first walked to the sanatorium, I re-

## Two Deaths

member that Tony pointed out a framed glass enamel sign which hung above a shop on the other side of the road. Against a jet background was represented a man standing so as to display his left arm in a sling, his right artificial arm, his one glass and one shaded eye, his rupture belt, his truss, his leg in irons.

"Well, I hope I don't look like that when they've finished with me."

Of course, the operation was thoroughly enjoyable. The appendix was whipped out. After two days he was sitting up in bed eating chicken, and talking to his neighbour, Humphrey, an English schoolboy who happened also to be in the hospital, so that the kind nuns had put the two *Englaender* together.

Humphrey was small and looked about fifteen, although he was nineteen years old. He had fair, untidy hair, dark blue, lively eyes, a snub nose, and a talkative thick-lipped mouth that rather protruded. One noticed at once the gap in his mouth where two front teeth were missing.

"Have you had an appendix out, too?" I asked him.

"I wish to God I had," he said, looking at Tony, "like that lucky devil." He held out his two hands, and I noticed that his arms were thin but swollen at



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the joints and shoulders and that they bent stiffly from the elbows. "The silly asses!" he chortled. "Those silly asses of English doctors got me here. Well, one day when I was at school I was playing cricket when I missed a catch, which I most certainly ought to have caught quite easily, and it came a biff on my mouth here. Well, then I had my two front teeth removed. After that, the dentist screwed in two false teeth, of the sort that can't be taken out. Two weeks later, my arms and legs started swelling in a rather mysterious way, so I went to the doctor. In a week's time I had six doctors consulting over me and they X-rayed every blessed part of my body yet they never thought of my teeth. Then finally they found that I had had two abscesses above my teeth all the time. By then it was too late to cure me of the teeth, so they sent me to a nursing home in the country, where my legs were put in plaster of Paris, which they kept me in for two and a half years. When they removed the plaster of Paris they found my legs had grown so stiff at the joints that they wouldn't bend. Then they gave me up and sent my father a bill for five hundred pounds, which he couldn't pay." He paused, rather breathlessly. Then he grinned happily and said again, with relish: "The silly asses!"

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I showed I was indignant, and asked: "What are you doing here?"

"Well, they've put me under an anæsthetic and bent my legs. But they don't say whether I'll ever be able to walk again properly. I want to be a reporter of football matches on a sporting weekly. But I've never heard of a sporting reporter going around in a bath chair!"

Neither had I, so I did not say anything.

He had been ill so long that he was an expert on illness. He explained to me that the Czech boy whose bed was next to Tony's had had glands, and that the old Turk with a bandage over his face had probably simply been fighting, "and drinking, too, I expect," he added, smacking his lips. Still, he could not make out what was wrong with the old man whose bed was immediately opposite his own.

This old man did not say a word. He lay flat, with his head sharply raised by a pillow. He lay always in the same position. Sometimes his glittering, almost motionless eyes were wide open, sometimes they were shut tight. When they were shut his face seemed flat and impassive like a wall, with the skin the colour of old Portland stone, cracked and yet massive, hollowed where the toothless mouth had fallen in, the general flatness only relieved by the

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thin breathing wedge of the nose. Above this ruin, his short grey hair bristled vividly, like a tuft of grass. Occasionally he moved his hands, and sometimes he groaned, once, he laughed, but we could not tell why.

"He seems to have some kind of a stomach wound," Humphrey said. "They dress it every few hours."

"Perhaps he's had a fight, too," suggested Tony, with an amused indifference which rather surprised me.

"No, I scarcely think so," Humphrey murmured, wisely shaking his head.

Tony turned amiably on me. "Don't you go and get yourself mixed up in any fights. Humphrey's been telling me about the political troubles here. A good many bombs still seem to go off every day. So don't let the police come in here, searching after you. I don't want to lie in bed, with you shot down at my side and bullets whizzing through the walls."

I smiled and promised that I would be careful.

His appeal to me was in the form of ridicule, yet there was an underlying seriousness in it which flattered me, although actually the seriousness was still more ridiculous. We were simply two English tourists paying a short visit to Vienna; we

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could do. Yet I felt completely an outsider. Supposing, I thought, I had even been Dr. Mur, for he was the "international" Englishman dressed in grey cloth with grey boyish eyes and greying hair, to whom I had been introduced and who became my first and most prejudiced informant, would I feel less remote? For Dr. Mur had a finger in every Continental pie. An ex-schoolmaster, he was self-important and may—for all that I could discover—have been quite useful; but he talked so much, it was impossible to find out how he really spent his time. He rushed about Europe in the fastest and most luxurious trains or aeroplanes, smuggling Communist literature and obtaining fantastic information. Supposing I had known even as many rumours ("In Styria they are working night and day making armaments," "Italy will soon give Austria Trieste") as he whispered into my ear? Yet I still would not be sharing the struggle of the Viennese workers, I would only become a ghost, an abstraction, a buzzing point, where, in a self-conscious and particularly vain individual, the glamour of a small inheritance acquired late in life met the glamour of poverty, and became Dr. Mur.

Tony's hint that I might get into trouble suggested to me that Dr. Mur lived in a fatal state of

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self-deception which I soon might share: imagining that he was risking the dangers of his Austrian comrades; whispering how they were shot at when crossing frontiers, how they were imprisoned, how one was afraid to sleep for two nights under the same roof. I thought that with all the eager activity of an old public schoolboy who had never grown up, and who still, as a disguise, wore the "old boy's" tie, he fell richly into the trap of being flattered by suffering which he did not share, and of imagining that he escaped, by his own cleverness, dreadful penalties. Cynically, I assumed that if he had ever done any crime to raise more than one eyebrow on the face of a bland official, he would have been summoned to the police station, a few questions would have been asked, some words written on his passport and he would have had to leave the country.

I condemned Dr. Mur and labelled him unreal; yet I myself did nothing except read all the documents he gave me. From them I learnt how the achievements of the Socialist municipality in Vienna had systematically been discredited by the Dollfuss Government; of the hesitation of the Socialist leaders, who allowed their papers and their meetings to be forbidden, their army disarmed and sent

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home; how they desperately postponed the fight against the Government until a symbolic act had been fulfilled, when the flag of the municipality was hauled down from the town hall. Then the clash came. The workers unburied their arms and fought. The Government shelled them in the tenement houses built by the municipality. The Italian Government had given certain orders.

But if I could think of Dr. Mur as a ghost, what was I, leading this life divided between the sanatorium, my endless exploration of the streets, and my meals at a boarding house full of old ladies?

One afternoon, when I was at the sanatorium, a pale quiet, neat young woman visited the old man. She brought him some flowers, touched his hand, held a glass of water to his lips and sat beside his bed for about half an hour. When she heard us talking English, she came over and said good afternoon in the businesslike manner of an Austrian anticipating a free English lesson.

She explained to us that she was the niece of the old man, whose name was Herr Fuchs: Miss Fox, she was. Humphrey asked her straight out what was the matter with her uncle. She hesitated a moment, seeming embarrassed. Then she said, rather dubi-

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ously: "I think it's a gland, the prostate gland. A thing that old people get trouble with."

"You can't just think, you must *know* whether it is or not."

"I do know," she said, "it's the prostate gland. But they are such fools"

"How do you mean," asked Humphrey. "Who are fools?"

"His doctor is a fool. I think they have poisoned him."

"Poisoned him," he grinned, "how could they have?"

"You see, they say it is his own fault. They give him a local anæsthetic, and they say that during the operation he moved."

"The *idiots*!" Humphrey laughed.

She was very pleased to be talked with. She said that her uncle was an official in the financial department of the municipality. She explained that she was a medical student. She asked Tony where we were going for his convalescence. Tony did not know. So she recommended an hotel in the mountains kept by her father: it was called The Red Fox and was about two hours distant from Vienna.

At this point in our conversation, her uncle, for the second time that I had heard him, seemed to

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laugh. His mouth opened, his eyes widened, and he made a chuckling noise. It was not, really, at all unpleasant. When I looked at him again it seemed to me that his illness had struck him with a wide intelligence which obviously welcomed us and even courteously allowed us to laugh at him. It was as though his head were a fourth person in the room, laughing with us over his ridiculous, ruined body.

When his niece was gone, Humphrey exclaimed: "The silly ass!"

"Who's a silly ass?" asked Tony, who had liked the girl.

"She is. She can't fool me. That old man hasn't got prostate gland."

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because he has *two* wounds," said Humphrey. "There's one higher up. I can see in the mirror at the end of the room, when the nurses are dressing his wounds."

I did not answer, because I suddenly realized then that old Herr Fuchs was going to die. I felt divided and anxious, since I did not want Tony to be troubled by this death, which might be painful and distressing, yet, at the same time, I felt it was unfair to hope that, after Tony was gone, Humphrey would



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have to put up with it alone. "Do you think he may die?" I asked.

"Oh, yes, we know he will," said Tony.

Humphrey grinned, and said. "Wherever I go, people always die on me. At my last hospital one of the patients was walking about the room when suddenly he fell on to me and died there, just sitting on my bed. I was furious."

"It must have been rather a surprise," said Tony, "did you tell him to get up?"

Then Humphrey started ragging Tony for chasing after Herr Fuch's niece. "All the same," he sighed, "I wish that I were able to have someone in here with me." Then, inconsequently he teased Tony, who was Welsh, for saying "cassell" instead of "castle" and "cassk" for "cask". They enjoyed themselves. They discussed football and racing, they played cards and they told each other the history of his life. They ragged the nuns, and Humphrey made one of them blush by saying, when she was in the room: "One day I woke up earlier than usual and lay dozing, and what do you think? I found that sister was standing over me, stroking my hair. She must be sexually repressed."

After that day, when I came into the ward, and when I left, Herr Fuchs raised his head slightly in the

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faintest of salutes, as a child might stand in a field and wave to people in a passing train. The action one can only think of as gay. Yet, considering it as a gesture—as, perhaps, a figure in a dance—it has a certain melancholy.

On the day of my last visit but one—my last, on the next day, was simply to fetch Tony—I brought Dr. Mur with me. For him it was an annoying visit, since my friends took very little notice of him. They were excited about two events that had taken place on the previous evening. First of all, at about six o'clock, an official, who looked like a police officer, had come round. Dr. Mur rather sat up at this. It was his own world. "What sort of an official?" he asked.

"With tabs and braid and a uniform the colour of a billiard cloth," said Tony, "and a nice little moustache. He had a large sheet of paper, like a thermometer chart."

"Well, it might mean       " said Dr. Mur slowly.

"What?" asked Humphrey.

"Well, a lot       " said Dr. Mur with a mysterious spasm that half-closed his eyes and made him look almost acute. "It might mean anything in Vienna, now," he burst out with an obscure indignation.

"What happened, then?" I asked.

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"Well, at about ten," said Humphrey, "the old boy started gasping and choking and rattling—yes, a most amazing noise like a rattle it was, a death rattle, I suppose. Well, first of all the nuns started warming him and giving him drinks of some sort through a tube, for a long time. Then suddenly they stopped. They all left the room, and a few minutes later, wearing their black robes and crosses, they trooped back with a priest, and two other nuns carrying candles. Then they all kneeled down and prayed and chanted. But the absurd part of it was that the old man just looked very angry, and immediately started to get better."

"This morning his niece was here," interrupted Tony, "and she told us that her uncle wasn't religious at all. He hates the church. He's never been to church."

"And this morning," Humphrey said, "if he wasn't sitting up in bed and eating *goulasch*!"

I looked at the old man, and he met my eyes with his usual salute of recognition. There was a large Bible which the nuns had left on the commode beside his bed. For the first time I saw his tired gaze drop and I saw that he had fixed it on some papers which I was carrying under my arm. The most prominent of them was an English Socialist news-

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paper. This was the longest silent exchange of thoughts I had ever had with him, and I felt a need to spare him—and myself—any more of it. So I stood up to go. As Dr. Mur and I reached the door, I said “*Auf wiedersehen*” to him and he slightly turned his head. At the same moment he raised a little from the bed-cover his left hand with the fist clenched, as the hands of very ill people are.

“Whew!” said Dr. Mur when we were in the road. “You’ll be glad to get Tony out of that place and away from that disgusting old man.” For some reason, that day he was wearing khaki shorts. He lifted a hand to smooth his long grey mane-like hair. Whenever he smoothed his hair he imagined that the name Lenin meant “lion”, and he felt stronger: “very lenine” would have been his way of describing himself.

We parted at the corner. Dr. Mur looked at me and said: “What the hell are you doing? You will be arrested if you do that. *Take care*. That is the Socialist salute.” Unconsciously I had raised my fist and repeated the old man’s gesture.

I felt rather depressed as I walked along the broad, hot, sunlit Ring. Past the town hall, past the closed and barred Parliament with a boarded-over stand in front of it, where the monument in honour

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of the republic had been dismantled. Soon, on my left, beyond some gardens, was the Chancellory, where, in a few days' time from now, the Chancellor, Dollfuss, was to be murdered. I came then to the Heldenplatz, and seeing a little crowd standing in the square, round a dais, I walked in. No one looked at or interrupted me, so I walked right up to the platform and mingled with the few people who were listening to the address. A few officers, dressed in the uniform of the Fatherland Front, were on the platform, and soldiers, whom they were about to inspect, were lined up in the square. A very short man with round boyish peasant eyes, full lips, snub nose, a small moustache and a very high forehead rather pathetically and prematurely lined, with the hair brushed back above it, was speaking, or rather shouting, with an almost comic air of assurance and waving his hands a great deal. He was the Chancellor. Behind him sat Minister Fey, a man with a face white and creased like a dirty handkerchief, shot through with bloodless lips and eyes like bullets. When Dollfuss had finished speaking there was a volley from the soldiers. He raised his arm to them. Then he turned and shook hands with Fey. As he did so, he switched on a smile which lit up his eyes and widened his lips insincerely, but

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almost prettily. The smile illuminated his face as a weak battery lights up a pocket torch. The pocket smile on the face of the pocket Chancellor bravely persisted. Now the men on the platform stood up. They all smiled and murmured informally, as a tiny little girl, round and suety like a dumpling, stepped forward and put her hand into that of the Chancellor. Then Dollfuss lifted his daughter up and dumped her down again and shouted "*Treu!*" Everyone shouted "*Treu!*" back. Then, still holding his daughter's hand in his own, he started trotting. Like a squirrel, still smiling, he trotted off the platform and trotted towards his private army. His soldiers shouted "*Treu!*" and there was another volley.

The white walls of the sunlit ward of the sanatorium: the patients lying in their beds, or sitting up in chairs: the nuns as sisters; this was not unlike the atmosphere of the health resort in the mountains. On the afternoon of our fifth day there, as we sat drinking coffee at a table put out in the village square in front of our hotel, the walls of the square, like the hygienic walls and windows of the ward, pressed round us with their clean whitewashed houses. Facing us, at the end of the square, the gratifying worldly gestures of baroque angels above the

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famous church porch were flanked on either side by two stone towers so high that they almost obscured the leaden dome behind. Nuns hurried through the square. The church was skirted by little shops where wooden Madonnas, jewellery and trashy souvenirs were on sale. In the middle of the square, in an immobile procession, waited motor cars, charabancs and horse cabs, placarded with advertisements for excursions.

Each morning we had left the square, and walked straight into fields beneath the mountains. The edge of the blue sky seemed a knife blade where it met the rocky peaks. The waving corn had a dreadful cleanness and only the flowers, half-hidden by the grasses, held a murmur of the valley. The sun shone with a clear, bleaching whiteness. As one walked or lay in that light it was impossible even to think, for it seemed to polish every shadow from the mind, while it mercilessly healed one.

On the table, lying between us, were a postcard and a letter. The postcard was a picture of the Kremlin, sent by Dr. Mur from Moscow. "Suddenly obliged to come here. Have seen so many plays and films and been taken so many tours of factories can hardly stand. Saw Red Army yesterday. Marvellous." With his usual conspiratorial caution, he

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had left it unsigned. The letter was from Humphrey. He was rather depressed, and said he missed Tony. Then, in a more familiar style, he cheerfully added that Herr Fuchs had died, but that before dying he had been moved to another ward. We calculated that he had died a fortnight before, while Tony was with me, recuperating in Vienna for this journey.

"Poor Humphrey," Tony said.

A tall young man with fair reddish hair and a consciously superior gait walked past our table. As he did so he smiled, narrowing his lightly blood-veined, pale eyes and showing his ivory, fang-like eye-teeth. The smile had the effect of drawing attention to his vixenish ears. He was the son of Herr Fuchs, the manager of the hotel. Above us, against the wall of the hotel, was a large painted sign of a red fox. Tony said: "Let's go and look for Herr Fuchs' grave."

There was no graveyard near it, so we went inside the church. A great many panels told where people had been buried under the floor; by far the commonest name lettered on these panels was Fuchs. There were more elaborate ornaments, and even groups of statues in the church, but all of these were old. On either side of the altar, in glass cases, were two skeletons, their bones crowded together



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and carefully covered in transparent tulque, which gave the skulls, the femurs, the tibias and all the larger bones a pale yellow colour. The skeletons were draped in robes made of stiff purple and yellow satin, and each wore a crown inlaid with clear jewels. Above either coffin was a notice stating that one saint was Saint Theodor the Martyr, and the other, with the broader pelvis, Saint Marina the virgin; it added their references, the list of cures performed, sacks worn, fasts seen through, stripes endured; it explained that each robe was worth twenty thousand schillings.

We decided that there must be a graveyard somewhere else in the village for the newer graves. So, after tea, we set out again; at the end of the village which we had not yet explored we found the graveyard.

Here the landscape was richer than that near our hotel. The mountains were green and hilly, not surmounted with rocks, like the higher mountains; and the trees were beech and birch, not pine. The fields were flat and the late sun cast long shadows from the stoops of hay on to the stubble.

Men were gathering hay in the churchyard. It was difficult to cut above and between the mounds, which they trod on harshly. Outside the gates the

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buyers waited, leaning against their prongs in a restful attitude.

The churchyard was untidy. Most of the crosses were made of black twisted ironwork, and many of them were lying on their sides. The older tombstones were cracked, and some of them had even been dragged away from their graves and were now lying across the main gravel path, or at the side of the yard. The new graves were raw heaps of clay, scattered with fading flowers, daffodils and even chrysanthemums, out of season and sodden with rain. There was no grave new enough to be that of Herr Fuchs.

All the time the sun hotly painted us, like a cognac intoxicating our skin and hair.

As we walked back to the square, we heard the church bells ringing loudly. We found the square filled with pilgrims. A few of these, who wore sandals and carried staffs, were authentically dressed in cowls. But the majority were tourists of a religious bent, determined to combine an excursion with a church service. The men, carrying stick and camera, wore tweeds with caps medalled and feathered, the women had the sleeves of their sweaty blouses rolled back; their faces were red and fat, with the skin rawly peeling.

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A few politicians were present, affectedly dressed in peasant costume, to gild the pill of the Vice-Chancellor's speech which was to be made at six o'clock. I learnt about the pilgrimage and the speech from a passer-by. Some local councillors who had gathered at a long table near our own were frankly spending the rates and taxes on getting drunk. They set an example of ignoring the rather subtle implications of the proceedings in the square.

Evidently a few people must have watched the staging of this marriage of the church to the Government with scepticism. Yet the scene was one of enthusiasm. There was a perpetual popping of motor cycles, banging of rattles, roaring of charabancs. The church door was wide open, and above the noise of the square the notes of the organ blazed like twigs burning invisibly in the air. The bells rang so loudly and so fast that they seemed a very high-pitched kettle-drum. All the motor cars and cabs had mysteriously disappeared, and the briefest glance assured one with absolute certainty that any vehicle—a car to take one to the railway station for instance—was absolutely unobtainable. Little brooches, with an enamelled setting of a stiff virgin wearing a dress which formed a complete isosceles

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triangle from her neck to the ground were being sold like hot cakes by several hawkers.

At eleven the procession began. A train of choir-boys in white linen vestments and black petticoats marched out of the church holding electric tapers which burned palely in the daylight and singing a politically biased hymn. In the centre of the procession walked the Vice-Chancellor and a Bishop, wearing the robes of the blessed martyrs in glass cases. The bones, naked of their garments, were carried round in their cases just the same. Two detectives, tactfully dressed as acolytes, flanked the Vice-Chancellor and Bishop on either side.

Feeling rather annoyed, I looked away from the square around our hotel tables and, at the same moment, I happened to catch the eye of the sleek young Fuchs who, owing to the sudden strain on the hotel service, was disdainfully acting as an extra waiter. He moved quickly to our table. Instead of ordering a drink, some impulse moved me to say: "We knew your uncle."

He started slightly: "What uncle?"

"The one in the sanatorium."

He flushed and said absolutely nothing. He just stood there for a moment, and then, with servile embarrassment, slightly bowed to us.

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"He is dead," I remarked, almost as if this were a question. Again he hesitated. Then he slightly smiled and said with a distinct effort at irony, the purpose of which escaped me: "Oh, yes, most certainly he is dead."

"We have been looking for his grave. Is it here?"

"Oh, no, it is not here," he answered quickly. He stood, almost like a soldier, smartly back again. If he had had more presence of mind, he would have escaped before my next question:

"Where is he buried?"

At that he did escape. He hurried off to wait on another guest. Watching him, I saw that he was not satisfied. Evidently, he felt that he had cut short our conversation at the worst possible moment. A few minutes later he returned to our table, stood firmly before us, and said with a quietness which I knew had the backing of all his family: "My uncle is not buried at all."

With finality he then left us. I saw that I would have to ask for my bill that evening.

"How can he not be buried," exclaimed Tony, "does he mean that they've just left him all this time?"

"After the February revolt of the Socialists, two

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hundred bodies were delivered to the anatomical institution in Vienna."

"But surely his relatives would have claimed him?"

"Perhaps they were ashamed of him."

"But then there were his comrades?"

"If they had visited him, or asked for his body, they would have become known to the police."

"But he was an official?"

"Vienna was Socialist when he became one."

We paused, opening our senses like a door into a concert hall, to the full battery of sound and incense and purple from the square.

"Do you think then that he fought in the revolt?"

"Of course, I don't know," I denied it hotly.

"But remember, we are living in the Dark Ages."

"Then what *did* he do?" Tony asked.

"Nothing, nothing, nothing!"

I was absolutely certain of it, as I had my final vision of his shrill head, so removed from its flattened body, from the red fox on the painted signboard, from the noise of the square, even from anything opposed to all this; so that it seemed quite shut off, crazy, like a telephone ringing in an empty house.

At that moment there was an attempt on the

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Vice-Chancellor's life: this was doubtless a slight reverberation from the murder of the Chancellor which had taken place in Vienna a few hours earlier. It did not in the least look like an assassination. There was no shock and no panic. All we knew was that, suddenly, from the edge of the crowd nearest the church, there came a loud bang which, however, did not make as much noise as a tyre bursting. Then we noticed in the same direction a haze of blue smoke as if from a small abruptly lit bonfire of wet leaves. There was a mild disturbance amongst the crowd near the church. The full goblet of interest hung up before the Vice-Chancellor became, as it were, tilted, and a few gulps of the drink fell on to the pavement. That was all.

Then I was aware of a certain sense of apprehension. The Bishop had stood still, as a conductor might tap his wand and stop the orchestra, because his audience was inattentive. The centre of the procession was now at our side of the square, opposite to the church. Attention violently swung back from the place of the attempt to the Vice-Chancellor himself. The hovering disconcerted eyes of the crowd were like a uniformed army waiting for some essential command. Rather to my surprise, I now saw the Vice-Chancellor standing within a few

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yards of me. He looked rather pale in his robes, and wearing on his head the crown of St. Theodor the martyr, set with rubies. I must say that he was perfectly calm. If he had been standing there at that moment, pressing the button to unveil a statue, he could not more signally have buried for me, beneath a cascade of flags, a solid wave of flowers, the image of Herr Fuchs.

He slightly raised his hand as a sign to the detective acolyte, and at once everything was postponed. Within ten minutes the police had cleared the square and sent off the people, who went away like school-children who have been given a day's holiday. We had to go indoors.

It was nothing, nothing. No one was hurt. Or, rather, one man's foot was blown off but he was not even a pilgrim and had nothing to do with the festivities. He just happened to be pedalling through the town. Indeed his presence was so irrelevant that it was at first suspected he might have engineered the crime, although there was no reason for thinking so, except that it was certainly a cause of suspicion that so complete an outsider should have had his foot blown off.

But that evening we heard the news of the second death. From the varnished loud-speaker in



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the hotel drawing-room, the strained voice of Major Fey announced that in the chancellory at Vienna he had witnessed, that afternoon, the assassination of Dollfuss.

BY THE LAKE



## BY THE LAKE

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### I

**T**he *pensionnat* for the backward and nervous sons of rich people was a converted private house situated above Lausanne.

In summer, at evening, whilst the light was tricky on the lake and town and mountains outside, the young men sat in their dining-room, eating their supper under the careful eyes of Madame Doumergue and her children, who owned and ran the *pensionnat*.

There was Madame herself, whom the children called "*Maman*" (this gave a homely air to the retrogressive meals), there were her two daughters, Madame Bonnard, the eldest, who was a widow, and Annette; and there was her son, Jean.

The new arrival, Richard Birney, who had been shown into the supper-laid dining-room, examined the faces of the family and of his fellow guests. He was not backward but nervous, and what his father

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called a "late developer": that is to say, he was interested in poetry. Although he was eighteen years old, he was afraid, he watched the faces rather as a prisoner may perhaps watch the faces of his warders, as one expecting harshness, but looking for signs of mercy and even understanding.

He looked at the wrinkled "wonderful" face of Madame; then at the radiant "experienced" face of Madame Bonnard, then at the freckled, inexperienced face of Annette; then at the handsome, normal face of her brother Jean.

Then he looked at his fellow pupils.

He was disappointed.

Sitting opposite to him was a German called Spieghler. He was a Prussian with cropped hair, he talked continually of how often he had duelled. There was a Jugo-Slav with hair which had been so well trained that even when not greased it stayed plastered back; he smiled whenever Spieghler spoke.

Besides these there were some English youths. Hanley, who wore a bright blue blazer with flat brass buttons; Bowling, who had scarred and heavy features but who played the piano exquisitely.

Maggan, a boy with negroid features, interested Richard; he seemed wholly occupied with his food, which he gobbled down very fast. When he had

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finished eating he gazed round the room with active eyes from under his dark eyebrows and occasionally he smiled to himself good-naturedly.

The English, with the exception of a boy called Donauld, all spoke French shockingly. The Germans were better; the Jugo-Slav and a Swiss best. Donauld spoke with a slightly halting, very pretty accent and Richard was instantly drawn to him.

Before supper, when the taxi had brought him to the door of the *pensionnat*, whilst embarrassed with his suitcase and fumbling for his money to pay the driver, he had been interrupted in his incompetent and adolescent uneasiness by a shout behind him. It was Donauld, who had run out of the garden where he had been playing with someone. Donauld stared for a moment at the new arrival and then ran back into the garden.

## II

After supper Richard went up to his room and poured his things out of his trunk into an untidy heap on the floor, took a few books from this heap and then lay on his bed and started idly looking at them. He was trying to forget that he was frightened

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by the supper and by the formality of his room with its small glass panel over the door, suggesting with its oblong cleanness that it was repeated, like the arrangement of beds in a school dormitory, in every room. He was afraid that they might have lessons to attend, even worse, that there might be games.

There was a knock at his door and Donauld came in. Donauld, looking apologetic, excused himself by saying: "I hope I'm not disturbing you but I wanted to know——" at first he stammered slightly. "Are you a relative of Arthur Birney?"

"He's my father."

"Then I think my father knows yours. My father's name is Lord Donauld."

"Of course, my father knows him very well." Richard looked closely at Donauld and recognized the politically intelligent profile of the father, with the promise of little humorous refined wrinkles at the eyes, so liberal, so free church, so barren. He said: "How funny my meeting you here! How did you ever come to be here?"

"You see, I've no brains at all." He laughed. "So I had to leave school. Besides, I was always getting ill there."

"I was ill too. So my parents sent me abroad for a

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year, before I go to Oxford." Then he asked: "What sort of a life is it here?"

"Sometimes quite nice, sometimes hellish," said Donauld, with an erratic vehemence.

"What are the people like?"

"They're all right." His attention seemed to flag. Then he said in a childish voice: "I don't like that German chap, Spieghler. He drinks. It's perfectly disgusting."

"What does that matter?"

"Of course it matters! He goes out in the evenings and comes back drunk. Besides, he's a bully, his face is all hacked about through a duel he fought when he was a student. Once he took on a bet and drank twenty-four glasses of beer in a drinking bout."

Richard asked: "What is the boy like who gobbles his food down so fast?"

"Oh, Maggan! He's absolutely mad! You can see: he eats like a hog."

"Since when has he been here?"

"Three months. Sometimes he doesn't speak to anyone for days; he walks about the garden looking at caterpillars under a magnifying glass, and he mumbles to himself. I tried to make friends with him, but when he started lecturing me about the



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wickedness of women who wear short skirts, I really couldn't stand it."

"He sounds rather interesting," Richard said, with a fastidious gesture, as though he were going to take up a notebook and a pen.

Although he despised Donauld, Richard felt pleased. Here was someone he need not be afraid of.

### III

The next morning Richard got up early, and after a first feeling of gladness he was depressed.

He went down to breakfast, wondering whether there would be regular lessons starting at nine o'clock and games starting at two-thirty in the afternoon.

But no, he was relieved to find that there was no parade. Maggan, Donauld, Bowling, and Hanley, the sporting affair, were there in advance of the foreigners. The meal was relievedly casual. As he came into the room, Richard heard Hanley saying to Bowling, in a roguish voice: "Of course, if she's in I will be round there this afternoon."

"You bet you will, old man," said Bowling, emphasizing the manliness of "old man".

Maggan, looking assertively primitive, was stand-

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ing up and pointing, as he violently rang the bell. The cook came in and he asked angrily for his porridge, which was prepared in a special way for him. When the porridge came he ate it in less than half a minute. He then rang the bell again and complained to the cook that the milk for his coffee had not been skimmed.

Richard tried to talk to him, but he gruffly said "Yes" or "No" to any question. Occasionally he smiled to himself, in a charming and candid manner.

After breakfast Richard left the house hastily and climbed up the white dusty road that led away from Lausanne. The day was fresh with large white clouds which occasionally hid the tops of the mountains.

He passed a corner where some new houses were being built and then he walked parallel with the shore of the lake until he came to a village with a red-towered brick church. The road then passed great houses with green and yellow shutters and with scented shrubs in their gardens hanging with yellow and purple masses of blossom.

Then he came to a pine wood and through the naturally formed paths between the straight stems of trees he caught glimpses of the blue silk surface of the lake, like a Japanese landscape.

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He walked further and further, without looking much at the landscape but looking mostly for the quicksilver movements of lizards at the side of the road. He was thinking all the time, mostly about himself, but occasionally the movement of a lizard, the crystal grain of sand lying in a pool of dust made dazzling white by the sun or the ultramarine shadow of a pine trunk, lying across the road like a railway sleeper, caught his breath and made him take an objective pleasure in the fine day.

He walked for many miles and then in one of his moments of complete self-forgetfulness he suddenly ran away from the road through the woods down the side of the mountain, thinking that he would find another road that would take him back to Lausanne.

When he got back he found that they were all seated in the dining-room ready for another meal. Madame Doumergue welcomed him and asked how he came to be so late. When he had explained, everyone seemed amused.

Spieghler said. "Ça était vraiment formidable." He always used the word "*formidable*".

Pierre called Richard "mon vieux".

The unmarried daughter, Annette, who had brown hair and a fat agreeable face, then shrilly be-

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gan to tell the history of a dreadful railway accident.

"It was altogether so remarkable," she said. "A coachful of people completely fallen into the lake. But luckily no one was drowned."

"Miraculous!" exclaimed Madame in an old voice.

"How did it happen?" asked Pierre.

"*How?*" exclaimed the married daughter, Madame Bonnard. "Haven't you heard? The train was going up the incline there, when the last carriage slipped the coupling, and. . ."

"Horrible," interrupted Annette.

"Écoute, ma sœur, no one was killed," she reminded her. "It fell into the lake with everyone in it, *annihilated* one would expect, like that."

"Most extraordinary," said Pierre. Then he continued earnestly. "But I thought those couplings were impossible to break. How *could* it have happened?"

"Mechanically that would be very difficult for an engineer to explain," said one of the Germans, finally.

"On ne sait pas," said Annette, shrugging.

"God knows," said Madame, again in her old voice.

So far the conversation had been carried on by the

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Doumergue family. It was not only interesting as talk, it was carried on with a certain gay authoritativeness by the family, for it was also a lesson. The boys were expected either to join in, in French, or else to listen and listen.

Hanley now turned to Jean and said heavily: "Est-ce que vous péchez?"

"Qu'est-ce que vous dites?" asked Annette in her rich voice.

Amid sympathetic applause Hanley was allowed to explain in English that he meant to inquire whether Jean fished.

"Mais naturellement," Jean agreed.

Richard looked at Hanley and detested his lamb-white wool sweater, his pink, clean, hairy ears, his decadent Greek nose, his spoilt weak mouth. At the same time he felt convinced that Hanley was the sort of animal who would survive.

Just as he was hating, Donauld called across the table in his nervous but attractive French:

"Will you come and see Chillon with me this afternoon?"

"Where is Chillon?" asked Richard, surprised.

His ignorance scored him another laugh. They all explained.

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### IV

There were many people waiting to go on the boat, so Donald thought it would be crowded and suggested that they take first-class tickets. Richard immediately agreed but he felt anxious for he had so little money, he doubted whether he would be able to pay even for this whole excursion and that was his pocket money for two weeks. Then, when they had paid for the tickets he was relieved, for he had been thinking in terms of French francs. He thought that the fare would cost at least twenty francs, but it cost only six. He was delighted, and then he realized how expensive that was in Swiss francs and he was worried again.

Donald was upset and excited by the pushing and the crowd. At last they got on to the boat and they sat on the deck, smoking. Smoking was still new to them: it gave them a sensation so strong that it stirred them with a vague passion.

They talked about parents and brothers. Donald said his father had forbidden him to smoke, and he said that although he smoked he would never drink wine. Richard said that vice was ennobling.

Donald looked round and noticed two young

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men, one of whom was called Girton, who had previously been for some months at the *pensionnat*. He went over to talk to him, whilst Richard sat watching the smoke of his cigarette curl upwards into the still air. He wondered how violently it would jerk backwards when the boat began to move.

He then looked at Girton. Girton had gravel-coloured hair, a pale lobster complexion, and a flat snub nose.

Donauld came back and said: "He's quite the best fellow we ever had at the *pensionnat*, and he's very clever too. He has just learnt German in nine months, but naturally he has forgotten a great deal of his French."

Just then he heard Girton's voice say, very loud: "For God's sake, don't tell Madame Louise I met her. Keep clear of that, whatever happens."

The voice grew loud again like a self-conscious baby's. "Most 'xtraordinary thing: they thought she was *my* child when we went together."

Richard flushed. Yet even whilst he despised this talk, he felt it was illogical that he was shocked.

When the boat began to move, he and Donauld strolled about, and they watched the near shore go past fast and the shore of the other side of the lake

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with its huge mountains seem not to move. Richard noticed such things closely and he noticed himself noticing them. On the far shore were the mountains, but on the near shore towards Lausanne and Vevey there were only slopes terraced for vineyards. Occasionally rising from the verge of the lake were old villages with roofs recalling Dürer engravings.

On the beach near the landing place they saw hundreds of bathers with their bodies tanned by long exposure to the sun. Boys dived from rocks and with a small laughter of surf round them pushed off into the deeper water.

The boat arrived at Chillon. They walked uninterestedly up the main street and arrived at the Byron-sung castle. After paying a franc they paid another franc and then they walked round the building, following the little table printed on the tickets. "No. 1 Entrée, ingresso, entrance; No. 2, Corps de garde, corpo di guardio, guardroom; No. 3 . . ." right up to No. 35. The guardroom, halls, dungeons, and passages, were full of Americans reading out aloud from Baedekers, peering behind tapestries, endeavouring to prise open chests, carving their names on pillars, or frankly rushing round without pausing even to annoy anybody.

They came to a large stone hall with hewn win-



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men in the *pensionnat* that they liked ices. Richard had an apricot ice and Donauld a chocolate one.

The ices cost one franc fifty each. Richard was just thinking how cheap they were when he remembered how expensive they were, and then he became uneasy and started wondering how much the dinner on the boat was going to cost. Emboldened by his frankness about the ices, he said. "Damn, this is going to be very expensive."

Surprising him once more, Donauld said:

"Yes, it is: ices cost only sixty centimes at a place near the *pensionnat*. Shall we leave?"

"I don't see how we can do that! We've eaten the things now."

"Oh, yes, I suppose we have," said Donauld in his childish voice.

It was now almost time for the boat to start back and, as they walked, another barrier between them seemed to have fallen away: the fear of each that the other had money.

Richard said: "This place is going to ruin me, I fear. I've just come from France where everything is so cheap. The franc is only worth twopence there, but one seems to pay so nearly the same number of francs here for the same things that I cannot make myself realize they are really five times as expensive.

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Why, to-day I've spent almost as much money as I have for a week."

Donauld asked shyly:

"Well, how much do you have for the week?"

"Twenty francs, I suppose," he said, flushing and exaggerating by forty per cent. "I suppose we'll have spent that by the time we've had dinner on the boat."

"Good God, you're all right! I'm only supposed to spend five francs a week."

"Why, at that rate you'll have spent your allowance for the month this afternoon."

"Oh, no, you see, I borrow from Pierre, and then he puts it down on the bill as 'extras'. I could never manage otherwise. It would be impossible."

"I suppose it would," agreed Richard, thinking of slum mothers and of unemployed people living on fifteen shillings a week. "Look here, shall we give up the idea of having dinner on the boat?" he asked impulsively, going scarlet.

"Yes, let's."

So the money business was over. After this they only laughed about money.

They bought sandwiches and enjoyed eating them on the boat more than they would have liked a meal. They were intoxicated by the evening.

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Night clouds were beginning to gather and the sunset smouldered between charcoaled lines of cloud. To the east the water was slate-grey and the lake shore a high and looming black with watery lights below. To the west the water reflected the sunset. it slowly became a sheet, immense, as still as oil, wrinkled and scarred by marks that seemed to have been engraved by the winds or the boats of years ago.

There was a party of schoolchildren in the third-class part of the boat who started singing a melodious chorus.

Richard got up and walked about the deck to fight down his feelings of tenderness. He looked at Donauld leaning on the rail, with his chin resting on his hand. He overcame an impulse to touch his hand.

Donauld said abruptly: "How vilely they sing." He said that at his school the boys had been taught by a master who was the eighth best musician in England, and that they sang part songs much better. He himself had been in the choir at school. Richard started to dislike the singing. But he remembered Byron's lines:

*"And like music on the waters  
Is thy sweet voice to me"*

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and he thought that the music Byron had heard was probably not very good music.

They talked of Donauld's resolution to take no wine and then of religion. Donauld was a Presbyterian, Richard an agnostic. Richard argued a little, with a luxurious weakness, not pressing Donauld. He was not as unflinching as often, when alone, in his search for truth.

He heard Donauld say to him with a confident smile:

"I hope you won't mind my being rude, but I am almost sure that when you are older you will think differently about this "

"That may be true," he answered languidly.

"Then you are converted by me?"

He did not answer. The boat had touched the quay.

## V

"So here's the atheist," said Bowling at breakfast the next morning.

"Ruminating with the shades of his great predecessor Gibbon on the shores of the lovely lake Leman," said the sporting Hanley with unexpected smartness.

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"Won't you say good morning?" asked Bowling.

"I suppose that up there in the Homeric clouds it's really afternoon," said Hanley in his slightly Cockney voice.

"Good morning," said Richard. "What do you know about Homer?"

"I've just read the last book of the Odyssey, before breakfast."

"In Greek?"

"Yes, sir, in Greek."

"Some of the others of us know a thing or two as well," said Bowling. "Hanley's not a backward. He's a nervous. You'll be surprised to learn that he's a scholar of King's College, Cambridge. He came here to improve his French, which, I must admit, is bad."

"We're evading," said Hanley.

"I suppose you're a birth-controllist as well," said Bowling. The "ist" offended Richard.

"Yes, I am."

"Well, what the hell do you know about it, you bloody concerted little fool?"

Richard glanced at Donauld, who pretended to be absorbed in his food. Then he said.

"I thought you played the piano a little mechanically."

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"Don't try to get out of it."

"I'm not trying to get out of it. It's impossible that a person who was a good musician could be as intolerant and stupid as you are being now that's what I mean."

"Bloody nonsense," said Bowling. "Music's got nothing to do with decency."

"Precisely."

"Don't interrupt. This is a question of decency. Fools like you should be stopped from going about making disgusting asses of themselves. You're unclean and unnatural. I don't mind a chap having as many wives or mistresses as Henry VIII, but when it comes to birth control. . . ."

"You don't mind a chap having as many mistresses as Henry VIII. You don't mind his having children by all of them, you don't mind the sufferings of the mothers, nor the miserable lives of the children, so long as respectability is preserved!"

"You're a child. What experience have you of these things? You don't know what you're talking about."

"It's you who are babyish!"

Hanley interrupted them, speaking with his shop-walker precision. "I agree with you that Bowling's arguments are not very good, but he is right. My

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family is by way of being Christian Scientist, you see, so naturally we don't approve of interfering with Nature."

"Christian Scientists, I suppose, would consider that birth control is immoral in the same way as calling in a doctor when you are dying is immoral."

"I've never heard a Scientist say that," said Hanley slowly.

"Well, what do they say?"

"It's rather difficult to explain off hand, but if you'd come round to the Temple one day, I'm sure you'd be convinced."

Bowling chipped in here and was beginning to insult Richard, when, to the surprise of them all, Maggan, who had just finished his meal, looked up and said "Stop using such filthy language. Birney's quite right, and you're a fool."

"My God," said Bowling, getting up. "See whom you've got on your side," and he left the room.

"I'm very glad to have you on my side, Maggan," said Richard when he was gone. "Will you go for a walk with me this afternoon?"

Maggan agreed to go and then relapsed into silence. Donauld did not say a word.

After a few minutes Richard went up to his room. He felt overcome with shame, for he realized

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it was true that none of them had known what they were arguing about. They had discussed a question which was vital to them, with the silliness of children discussing a six-course dinner. He cared so much that for the first few minutes he did not think of Donauld, indeed, he could not do so, at every moment of crisis he was condemned to think only of his isolated self.

Richard went for his walk with Maggan. He talked the whole time of Donauld.

When Richard came home he found Donauld, with a frightened expression, sitting in his room. He said at once:

"Did you see how Bowling looked at you when he left the room? He detests you, it isn't safe; you must tell Madame!"

"Nonsense!" said Richard. "He can't do anything. Besides, he isn't the sort of person who would attack anyone."

"No, no. I'm quite serious. Once he did lose his temper with Girton and simply flew at him. He's angry with me too, because he got it out of me that you had said you were an atheist. He seemed so furious that he had quite lost his head about the whole business. We had better leave this place as



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soon as possible. The sooner we get back to England the better."

"Don't be absurd. He's probably got some sort of complex on this subject, and I expect he's terrified really."

"Well, hasn't everyone got one of your 'complexes' about this; and doesn't everyone pretend to know about it, and isn't everyone really terrified?"

"Yes, that's quite true, but don't worry."

He sat on the edge of Donald's chair and stroked his hand.

## VI

Two days later, after supper, attracted by the lovely evening, Richard and Donald went out to look at the Alpenglów.

Donald introduced the topic that seemed most on his mind, by apologizing again for having let Bowling know about their conversation on the boat.

"But that's absurd," said Richard. "What I said wasn't particularly a secret, there was no reason why anybody should not know."

He had a knowledge that Donald wished to

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make him speak freely again. He was afraid of being a preacher and he was afraid of saying too much.

Donauld went on:

"Don't you think there are a great many things in the Bible—well, that young people would not understand about?"

"I'm afraid I have never read the Bible," said Richard, meaning to be clever.

Donauld looked puzzled "Well, you know what I mean. Like that about David's wives."

"Yes, I know about David."

"Don't you think that young children oughtn't to know about such things?"

"I don't see why anyone shouldn't know things that are true," Richard said, and then he saw that he was being priggish.

"But think, Richard, they can't possibly know until they're much older."

"Look," said Richard. He pointed to the crests of mountains turned the colour of pistils in tiger lilies by the sunset. The rocks were much too clear for it to be fine to-morrow. The mountains were so clear and flat that they seemed projected on to a screen by the setting sun, and Richard felt that his own life was thrown on to a screen like that nervous and detailed picture which seemed not of rocks, but

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of immensely magnified skeleton leaves. He began to shiver.

"Can they know?" Donauld implored him.

"Yes, they can. And they often find out for themselves and then it's a filthy secret they've unearthed and of which they're frightened. If they're brought up to know it just as a fact, as they know other ordinary facts, then they don't worry about it—there's no mystery. It's this secrecy, this conspiracy of silence that has done so much harm."

He was silent, feeling sick of his own voice.

But Donauld, thrilled and excited, wanted to go on. He was at the edge of that discovery he longed and hardly dared to make. His whole life had probably been a pilgrimage to this moment. Or rather, if not his whole life, one particular portion of it which was divided into sections; little closed-in beads of lust that ran on a chain of days and weeks for years; till now, that which had been hidden and furtive, cried to be let out, would burst its way through.

"But why?" he said. "I don't see how they could possibly know until they're years older than that. It isn't done!"

"Well, think what happens at school, how miserable you are, because you are always wanting to

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know about sex. How you continually think yourself wicked and believe that no one else can be as wicked as you are. Yet all the time, really, everyone around is occupied with the same thoughts and concealing them. The masters keep you as busy as possible with work and games, and stamp-collecting and debating, so that you have no time to think about this dreadful thing and no time to think either about the other more beautiful things that make life worth living. Then, when you're about sixteen, at an age when the milkboy and the grocer's and errand boys are walking out with their first girls, you fall in love with some cherubic looking boy in a lower form, who has a clear skin and blue eyes, and who needs protecting."

"It is quite true!" exclaimed Donauld excitedly. "All that happens."

Richard again experienced disgust at hearing his voice go on, preaching, preaching, preaching. But Donauld was still hungry for knowledge. He said:

"Then there's birth control. We discussed that one day here, but nobody seemed really to know about it. Not even Bowling, though he pretended to, and got very angry."

"Oh," said Richard, distressed, "I think it's simply the principle of an umbrella, I suppose."

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"But don't you understand? I don't know *anything*. I've never been told anything by anyone at all. At school we walked round the subject, but we never dared. . . ."

In the face of this aggressive and culpable ignorance Richard floundered. He said:

"Then I really cannot help you, truly I cannot. You must go to a doctor or to some scientist who will teach you about frogs or something of that sort."

He gazed helplessly at the mountains which were a velvet rose turning to velvet blackness.

"Then it *is* wrong of us to be talking about this," exclaimed Donauld.

"No, no, it isn't wrong at all. It's religious!" Then he thought it was absurd to have said "religious".

He then started cross-examining and he discovered that Donauld did know quite a lot; that he was only awaiting some confirmation of his knowledge.

"But," he explained, "I have never been told officially about these things. My father will tell me, I suppose, on my eighteenth birthday."

"What will you say then? Will you tell him that his information is superfluous?"

"No. That's why I think I ought not to know,

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and why I'm sure we ought not to be talking about this now."

"But don't you see what disaster ignorance can lead to? Do you know, once I read in the preface of a play by Bernard Shaw that sometimes people are actually married without one of them understanding what marriage means sexually?"

"But that's impossible," said Donauld, immediately becoming inconsistent. "Everyone *must* know, they must find out."

"Why, you yourself said just now that it was wrong to talk about such things, so surely it might occur sometimes that timid people never have the courage to learn about them at all?"

"But they could ask a doctor or someone of that sort."

A faint note of superiority sounded again in Richard's voice:

"I don't see why: the longer you go on in ignorance the more afraid you get of finding out. You might even be so ignorant as not to imagine that doctors were agents of the devil."

He again longed to stop explaining, and Donauld was so upset that this time he too could think of nothing more to say.

The night air made them shiver, so they turned

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back. When they reached the corner near the *pensionnat*, Donauld got some chocolate from a machine. This was one of those symbolic actions, like eating the ices, which made them both return to their childhood.

While they munched, he laughed and said:

"Well, obviously we mustn't take another walk after dinner, since our conversation gets so dangerous."

Richard sighed with exasperation and protested. Then Donauld turned on him and said angrily:

"You're an anarchist and say that nothing is wrong. You have no principles, so evil is the same as good to you."

Richard did not reply, and they walked home in silence. Before Richard was undressed, Donauld came into his room and said:

"I hope that in spite of what I said just now to you, that it's the same between us?"

Richard laughed "Yes", and Donauld left the room abruptly without saying good night.

## VII

Richard wondered the next morning how Donauld would greet him. He did not feel very happy,

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as the clear atmosphere of last night had been an accurate prophet of bad weather and the sky was rather clouded.

He also wondered if Donauld had again betrayed him to Bowling. But at breakfast the musician was in an excellent temper.

Donauld seemed completely to have forgotten their conversation, since he did not refer to it at all, but talked entirely about tennis.

After they had done their work for the morning he begged Richard to play a game of tennis with him before it started to rain, and he would not accept the excuse that Richard wished to read. He pleaded that he was going home in two days' time, so they would have few chances to play tennis. Tennis had, in fact, just that morning, become a craze with him.

They started playing a game of England versus Scotland.

Donauld played in an eccentric manner, twisting his racket about and missing the ball. Then when he had lost a game, he would say in a way that charmed Richard: "Now, if I try this time, I will win. I know I can and I will. Scotland three, England six." After winning a game, he would bow and smile to an imaginary audience.



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He played absurdly. He hit several returned balls far away over the surrounding net down the slope towards the lake. Then he would overcome Richard's irritation by his good-natured willingness to carry on the search for the missing ball himself.

Then they went down to the town to get an ice, not at the place where the ices cost sixty centimes but at a more expensive place (they were extravagant). On the walk Donauld behaved more childishly than ever. He talked mockingly to Richard and contradicted whatever he said.

Richard, though embarrassed, was not at all annoyed with Donauld, though he had been annoyed at school with other boys who had teased him.

He said. "I think that in spite of your father, you seem to have become intoxicated now."

"You damned fool, it's you who are perpetually drunk. The question is if ever you are quite all there."

Then, just as Richard was starting to get annoyed he would smile disarmingly and delightfully.

Richard felt ashamed that he could not be as silly as Donauld, and blamed himself for being a prig. He knew he was a born prig: it was a misfortune he had to put up with.

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It seemed impossible for Donauld to leave him that day. When they were back at the *pensionnat* he kept on coming into Richard's room. Finally he dragged a chair into it and pulled his book away from him.

"Talk to me, Ricky."

Richard went on reading Shakespeare.

He was interrupted by hearing Donauld read very slowly and irreverently, pausing to chuckle at the end of each line, this stanza:

*"Since I had loved ambition, since the stars  
Had seemed most near, and my Olympian friends  
The gods to whom the sun its glory lends  
Gilding the clouds where ride their smoke-wheeled  
cars;  
And since. . . ."*

Richard felt the blood rush to his head as these words swayed in his mind. He snatched the manuscript away from Donauld. Each word seemed to have struck him. With an immediate and unaccustomed critical perception he saw how impudent he had been to write "gods", "stars" and "sun". He blushed at the obviousness of the construction.

He tore up the poem. Then he turned on Donauld but he said nothing. He wished that he might

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lose his temper but he had not done so and he could not.

Donauld looked suprised, but he was not at all put off. He almost professionally raised his eye-brows (litle political wrinkles appeared round the corners of his eyes) and he said mildly: "Then you don't like poetry?"

"I love it. That's why I didn't want you to read that out loud."

"Poetry's bloody rot."

"Surely you can say something better than that?"

"No, I can't. There's nothing in it at all. Listen to this," and he read at random from a book that lay on the table:

*"It was no dream I lay broad waking:  
But all is turned, thorough my gentleness,  
Into a strange fashion of forsaking;  
And I have leave to go of her goodness,  
And she also to use newfangleness."*

"Now what's the sense of that?" he asked.  
"What's the use of it? Does it do anyone any good?"

"It probably did the poet good to write it."

"The poet? Why, I'm no arguer, but even I can see that that's beginning a vicious circle "

"It gives me pleasure to read it also."

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"But what's the *use*, *what good* does it do to anyone?"

"What good does anything do to anyone?"

"Why, bread's some use. Doctors do good and so do parsons."

He mocked Richard by making him enter this childish argument. Then he got up and sat on the arm of his chair, and, taking his hand, looked into his eyes.

"You're not offended, are you? I didn't mean to be unkind about your poem "

"No, no. I'm not at all offended."

"What, you're shivering!"

"Nonsense. Listen. Poetry does mean something sometimes. I'll read you something:

*"No longer mourn for me when I am dead  
Than you shall hear the sullen, surly bell  
Give warning to the world that I am fled  
From this vile earth, with vilest worms to dwell."*

"Do you believe that?" asked Donauld.

"Yes."

"Well, listen. I'm going to convert you one day," he said playfully, pushing Richard's arms against the chair.

"You will never do that." Donauld struggled, but

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he only pulled him harder against himself, passionately. "I am going to convert you."

As abruptly he let him go and said: "I must go down and see if there are any letters for me."

There was a letter from his father saying that his mother was to be operated on immediately for appendicitis.

## VIII

Richard did not think: "Appendicitis is nothing to worry about." He thought: "Perhaps she will die, and I have betrayed her."

He got out his writing-paper and started a letter.

"Dear Mother, I am so sorry this should have happened."

He started another. "It is impossible for me to say. . . ."

He felt so wicked that it was impossible for him to write. He thought she would know from what he had said that he didn't really care. Quite apart from Donauld, the very fact of writing "I" in the phrase "I am so sorry" made him feel miserable, selfish, intrusive. Why, when another is in pain, should she be interested that *I* want to draw her

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attention to *my* sorrow; and as long as I am so wicked, lustful, selfish, egoistic, young and greedy, that is obviously impossible.

Even whilst he was remembering her, he knew that in a sense he had forgotten her. He was remembering that he had forgotten, and he was remembering that he had remembered Donauld. He was the sort of person who is so egoistic and self-interested, he could not remember people who are ill or who fell away from his immediate self-interest.

There had, for instance, been friends whom he had known at school, who had been his daily companions—but now, however hard he tried, he could not remember their voices or their faces.

He hated to be the person that he was. He was overwhelmed to turn this sudden corner and to meet himself face to face: the face of a selfish, uncaring, lustful and egoistic young man. Yet, he reflected with satisfaction, he was upset; yes, genuinely upset.

## IX

He went down to tea.

"You are late, *mon cher*," said Madame, looking up from her cup.

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"Yes, I forgot. I mean, I didn't hear the gong."

"Didn't hear the gong?" asked Annette energetically. "I am sure I rang it loud enough, Bir-ney."

"It was careless of me. I suppose I really did not think."

"Yes, yes," said Madame, "I expect the child was preoccupied. Tea? Bread and butter?"

He ate two slices of bread and butter, then he fiddled with his plate and felt himself blushing.

He heard Annette say to her mother.

"He is obviously very excited and worried," and then she turned to him. "Perhaps you have letters upstairs that you want to look at now. If so, please do not let us detain you."

He thanked her and almost ran out of the room again, proud of their surprised glances.

He re-read his father's letter but before he had again become gloomy, Donald appeared and said:

"What the deuce is the matter with you?"

"Nothing."

"I mean, how can you behave in such an extraordinary way, dashing out of the room like that?"

"Well, my mother's ill. She has appendicitis and must be operated on."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Come and play a game of tennis, there's a good fellow."

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Richard frankly laughed. He said:

"Come here," and pulled him to his chair.

"You see, she might get worse, or die."

"Why, you yourself aren't well. You seem all flabby."

Richard stiffened at the word, and, pulling him on to his knee, said: "No, you see I'm strong enough," then he freed him again.

But Donald remained seated there, and, turning round, said: "But you were not like this before?"

He put his arms on Richard's shoulders and brought his face towards his own. "Your eyes, too, look terrified. You bend forward as though you were wooden and as though you could not help it but were frightened of me. Aren't you well?"

He broke off and then went on in a more playful manner "What a lovely mouth you have! I would like to kiss it, you are just like a girl. You see how limp your arm is when I lift it. You're so weak too. . . . But you should shave. You look as if you hadn't done so for a long time. Have you?"

Richard put his arms around him and said:

"It is you who are like a girl. You are sitting on my knee as though you were my lover."

"Well, aren't I your lover, my poet, and don't I love you?" he asked gaily.



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"Don't talk like that!"

He went away from him and sat on the bed without speaking.

"Why, what is the matter?" asked Donauld, amazed. "Are you mad?"

"Perhaps."

"Why, what do you mean? Do, for God's sake, explain," he said in the same frightened and grumbling voice as he had spoken about Bowling.

Richard did not answer and bent his head towards the floor. Then he raised his eyes and asked Donauld in a low voice:

"Do you love me?"

"Love you! What do you mean? How *could* I?"

"I mean, why were you sitting on my knee just now like that?"

"Why? I was only ragging. Besides, you pulled me there, for fun!"

"Did I? Well, I suppose you're right. Tell me, do you feel an inclination of that sort towards me? I mean, do I attract you in any way whatever?"

"I quite like you, of course. That is, as long as you don't behave madly."

"Well, then, tell me, do you like me in the same way as you think you might like a woman—a girl?"

"What's up with you?"

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"Tell me."

"No, I don't feel for you like that at all. So that's that. But I don't understand; what are you getting at?"

"Nothing. I suppose you can leave me now. I'm all right."

"No, I'm not going to leave you. You must explain now what this mystery is all about. Why did you ask me like that: 'Do you love me?'"

"I can't."

"You must. I want to know now what all this is about. You told me once before that what's true can't hurt," Donauld said, trembling slightly.

"I was being silly then. This might hurt you. It isn't truth, it's ugliness."

He still sat on the bed with his head bowed. He suddenly wished to tell Donauld everything that was in his mind.

He spoke quickly, hoping that Donauld would not understand him. He invented a legend whilst he was saying it. Some of it was a legend that he had created about his boyhood, since he had known Donauld. The legend was only partly based on fact.

"You see—if you do not mind my mentioning our conversation of the other night, since we have gone so far—the result of neglecting children and

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never telling them anything about sex is that they often get to know in a wrong way about it. When I was nine my father sent me to a preparatory school at Worthing. At this school there was a boy who had come from Maida Vale, who was the son of a small shopkeeper there. He was a lewd boy who knew everything there is to know about the 'facts of life', although he was only ten. At any rate he used to teach us to make experiments with each other. I was rather more sensitive than the others, so I went further in consequence, I suppose."

"You haven't explained anything to me yet."

"The rest is more difficult to explain and I myself don't entirely understand it. I think that as a result of this experimenting I got to fasten my sexual thoughts on men rather than on women."

"I can't hear, you must speak more loudly."

"You see, I suppose that I got what is called a 'complex'. Instead of falling in love with women, I started to do so with men."

"Then you *do* love me?"

"No, not you," he was abashed to realize that his confession amounted to a proposal. "I was speaking generally."

"I don't understand then."

"But you don't think I'm mad?"

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"Oh, no. I just don't understand what you're getting at." He shut his eyes for a moment as he said this.

Richard looked at him and saw it was true that he had not understood a word.

## X

"It is very fortunate," said Pierre at supper, "that the night has turned out so fine. The fireworks on the lake this evening will be truly wonderful."

"Who is going to see the fireworks?" asked Madame Bonnard.

"Ah oui, les illuminations seront vraiment formidables," said Spieghler. "Je vais."

"Good," said Mademoiselle Annette, "that's one. Who else?"

"Est-ce que tu iras, mon cher?" Donauld asked Richard.

Richard flushed and said: "Yes, I will go."

"That's three. Are you going, Hanley?"

He said yes, and then Maggan stuck up his hand as though he were in class and said "Moi aussi" in his harsh voice.

"C'est ça," said Annette, banging her sharp elbows

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on the table and thus saving Maggan from noticing Bowling's ironic smile. "Un, deux, trois, quatre."

"Anyone else?" asked Pierre.

Holst and the Jugo-Slav volunteered Bowling was not asked, as all the family hated him.

They went down to the lake and in the tram Richard stayed with the party in order to keep himself from having to think about his mother's illness.

They took their tickets and went into the barred-off enclosure at the side of the lake.

The crowd was so large that Pierre decided they had better separate, so he went off to meet a girl friend. Richard was puritanically shocked.

They managed to get places fairly near the lake edge. Whilst Hanley reserved them, Donauld and Richard walked up and down to see if there was any sign of the others. However, it was impossible to distinguish anyone clearly from the mass in the darkness, so they returned to their places, only to find that Hanley had disappeared.

They waited for some time but he did not return. Richard was quite pleased to be without him, but Donauld was upset and wanted to look for him. Richard said: "Don't do that, because he knows where we are and he can find us again, should he

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wish to do so; but if he wants to avoid us, as seems more likely, it is stupid to look for him."

"I don't want to stay with *you* all alone here," he rudely answered and disappeared. A few minutes later he came back and said: "If the bloody little fool likes to get lost, he can bloody well do so, I suppose. I'm not going to concern myself with him. He can go to ruddy hell if he likes."

A bit later however Hanley returned and then Donald became good tempered again, he started bantering Richard in the same style as he had used when they had played tennis together. He suddenly declared that he was going home on the next day and he asked whether Richard would miss him.

There were two boats moored off the jetty where the steamers came and from the boats the fireworks were going to be lit.

There was at first a crisis in the management of the fireworks, and apparently in order to save time, several cannon were fired off in close succession from the shore. A few people clapped sarcastically but before they had finished clapping there came a burst of red light from the boughs of the trees under which they were sitting. The light was strong enough for people to see each other's faces, as it turned from red to blue to white. The illumination

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was accompanied by a hissing from the cartridges which were tied to the trees. Then the light and the hissing died down and the sudden rush of thick darkness was accompanied by a burst of clapping. Then the thickness passed away again and the moon and the stars were visible.

After a rather long pause the mast of one of the boats became ablaze with one huge flame which seemed to cling to it and to lash into the upper air, thrusting back and also exaggerating the crowding darkness. As swiftly it died down again and the last tremors of light dropped like fireballs into the black water. Hardly had Richard time to look at this than from the deck of the other boat there came a burst of rockets ascending one, two, three, like coloured ribbons into the sky. By a second explosion these rockets were transformed at their apexes into clusters of unselled stars, as though a child had released them.

There came other rockets: thousands of them so thick together that the eye could hardly keep pace with them to see what new patch of the night they had stabbed and sown with light.

After that there came a tree of white rockets growing higher and higher, until at last it sank back, dropping fireflies into the water. Then a fiery octo-

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pus waved strange arms across the sky. At last, from the furthest boat, there rose a column of white which grew and grew more dazzlingly until all the crowd could be seen as clearly as in a tent of crude daylight, and then—"ÉTEINT"—it was all over.

After the brightness it seemed very dark, and in the dark the people got up and started hustling to get home.

They pushed towards the trams. Donald started to worry lest they should miss the last tram home.

They reached the stopping place to find that the tram was already waiting for them and that people were crowding into it.

Donald pushed forward into the crowd. Richard was amused. He did not push but waited at the edge of the crowd.

In the tram Richard started thinking again about his mother.

He found Donald standing up at the back of the tram and he joined him there. They did not speak much as they were both listening to two American young men and their much smaller brother who were talking in a loud and vulgar manner.

The tram stopped and the Americans got out, their



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voices not fading but the quieter tram fading away from them.

"Well . . ." said Donauld.

They themselves left the tram a few minutes later and entered the *pensionnat*, talking gaily. Then, remembering the others had come home sooner and were in bed, they crept upstairs, softly feeling their way along the banisters.

Donauld said good night to Richard at his door.

"Can't you stay and talk a minute?" Richard asked.

"No, I must go to sleep. You seem much gayer now, Richard."

"Good night, then," he said.

He undressed in his room and then lay in bed, waiting for Donauld.

He stretched out his arms and yawned, not for sleeping but for waking. He touched the linen with his hands. Then he drew up his knees to his chest and touched them with his hands. "*Ποιμήν*, pastor, berger," he thought.

Donauld knocked and came in and said. "Come into my room a minute, will you, Richard?"

"Yes," he said, having known that all this would happen. "I will follow in a moment."

Donauld went, looking at him strangely. Richard

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got out of bed and put on his dressing-gown and slippers and went into Donauld's room.

Donauld lay in bed. He looked at Richard and said: "I don't understand you. You are far too extraordinary. You looked almost drunk a few minutes ago, and now you look so sad."

Richard drew the curtain and looked out of the window and thought of his mother. "It's raining now," he said. "That always depresses me."

"It's very lucky for the fireworks that this did not start sooner."

They did not say anything for a little time.

"You are very funny," Donauld said at last. "I am sure that you are always *meaning* something."

"Perhaps. But you must excuse me if I was odd to-night, because I have been anxious."

"Oh, yes, of course. Come and sit here beside me," Donauld said, smoothing a place on the bed.

He sat down on the bed and thought of his mother's illness.

"What is the matter?" said Donauld. "Can't you talk? Why won't you look at me?"

For reply he turned round and stroked the hair of the weak and kingly childish face lying on the pillow.

"Do you know," said Donauld, smiling, "your

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benign influence is making me think? I don't feel half so cocksure now as I did formerly about things."

"If you are going to talk like that, you had better put the light out."

"All right. Go and put it out and then come back and sit here."

Richard did so. Coming back, in the darkness, he stumbled against the bed and fell against Donauld. Donauld held him and said: "Get in. You'd better get in with me. I'll push right up. It will be warmer."

"Yes" He lay beside Donauld, very still, not daring to touch him. *Ποιμήν*, pastor, berger.

Donauld went on. "You see, as I was saying the other day when we were on the lake, if only you do believe that Someone is there when you pray, He will be I'm sure it will help you. I wish you could let me try with you."

"Yes, I'm quite convinced that if only I could believe, it would help. But I can't."

"There, you see your voice trembles I'm sure you are really going to be a convert. Lately you've been quite different from when I first saw you. For instance, I've noticed that you shake hands with an altogether firmer grip. I'm quite proud of you. Now if only . . ."

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Richard was not attending. He was imagining an existence in which people behaved differently from Donauld.

"You know, you may not believe it, but religion really does change everything, and make your burdens lighter. Life is more beautiful for me than for you. I am not being superior. Your eccentricity, your nervousness, would go."

Richard got out of bed and went back to his room. "Good night," he said quietly at the door.

"Good night," said Donauld, and he dropped off to sleep, feeling sure that Richard was converted.

## NOTE

*The Burning Cactus* was written three years ago; the three stories *The Dead Island*, *Two Deaths* and *The Cousins*, were all written in the summer and autumn of 1935. *The Cousins* differs from the recent stories, having more in common with *By the Lake*, the first version of which I wrote in 1927. the reason is that I wrote *The Cousins* from the memory of a story which I have lost and which formed the second section of a novel beginning with the first version of *By the Lake*, this memory suggested a story to me which no doubt has very little resemblance to the original.

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